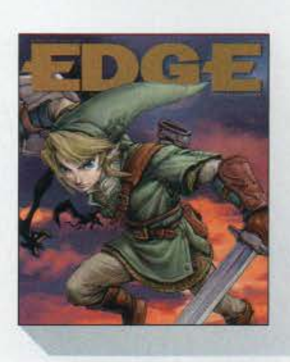

VIDEOGAME CULTURE
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There are times when being a videogamer seems like one big cliché. Like when the jauntily coloured caper playing out before you is peopled once more by NPCs in capes who are surrounded by familiarly dank cavern walls and caught up in a desperate quest to retrieve a shiny trinket bearing unimaginable powers, lest it is commandeered by The Dark And Sinister Forces Of Evil and used to bring about the total destruction of everything, ever – and beyond. Sometimes it's like we haven't moved on one hexagon from the early '80s, when we were all, obviously, 20 years younger, and 'interactive' tales of dragons and dungeons seemed so fresh and rich with possibility. But then we consider a new instalment in the *Zelda* series, something at once firmly entrenched in deeply rooted fantasy realms and yet able to spin the yarn in strange new directions, and it makes yomping around a grassy plain hacking away with a simple sword and shield seem like something that isn't hackneyed or backward-looking. This month we talk to Eiji Aonuma, the man behind the latest instalment in the classic series, to find out how Nintendo does it (see page 70).

The pairing of familiarity and weight of expectation also surrounds another big story this issue in the form of Microsoft's Xbox 360, unveiled on page 8. Familiarity? The new console ticks the expected boxes because it is building on a proven enterprise, expanding, for example, on Xbox Live. Weight of expectation? Well, Microsoft only intends to usurp Sony as the world's preferred videogame company, much as Sony itself once barged aside Nintendo.

Once you've properly considered what Microsoft is proposing, it isn't an outlandish scenario. Certainly not as outlandish as the notion that, after 18 years and 13 iterations on formats from the NES to the Philips CD-i, one of the most eagerly awaited games of 2005 would be one starring an elfin boy in a floppy green hat...



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"We can't even say 'lesbian' any more; it's 'women in comfortable shoes'"



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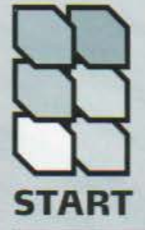
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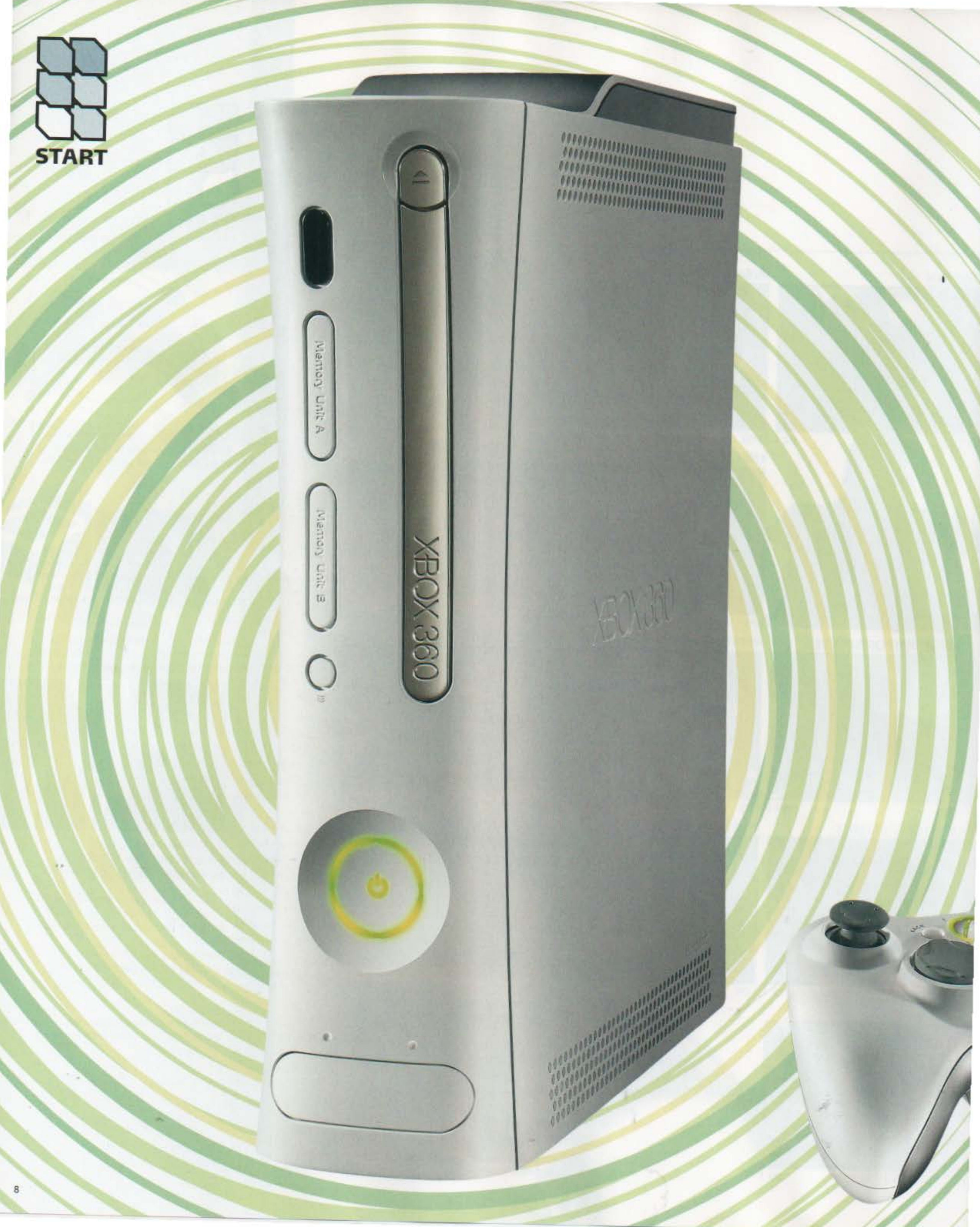
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START
Memory Unit A
Memory Unit B
XBOX 360





HARDWARE

360 sparks a revolution

Microsoft's new console sets about changing the way we play games

Console launches usually begin with tech specs. This one doesn't. First comes the stunning announcement of the timetable. Three launches – US, Europe and Japan – all before Christmas. First will be the US, with Europe and Japan following swiftly after, although the timing and order of these launches isn't yet confirmed. Pricing, for both the machine and its games, is also unannounced. And then comes the even more startling proclamation. **Robbie Bach**, senior vice president at Microsoft and chief Xbox officer, has a simple, extraordinary claim to make for Xbox 360: "It will be," he says, unequivocally, "the most powerful games machine this generation." It's hard to know whether to stifle a gasp or hide a smirk. With Sony and Nintendo yet to reveal the details of their machines, how can he be sure they won't be trumped? Surely it's either folly or arrogance to be making such grand claims before his competitors have shown their hands. But by the end of the presentation it will look like neither. Microsoft is setting out to redefine not just gamers' understanding of power, but their understanding of consoles.

The specs still matter, of course, and they suggest a machine which will be extremely competent. The official confirmed numbers don't differ substantially from what we revealed in **E**148 – the heart of the 360 is three symmetrical IBM PowerPC 3.2GHz cores combined with a custom ATI 500MHz GPU with 10Mb of embedded DRAM, all supported by 512Mb of GDDR3 RAM. All in, it delivers corporate vice president **J Allard**'s promised teraflop of overall performance. It's a carefully evolved system, developed in consultation with IBM and ATI, which should be able to offer a dramatic performance jump without the Xbox's high component price tag – "With Xbox," says Bach, "we were late, which meant we had to be powerful, and that meant we just had to pick the most powerful parts straight off the shelf. And that's about the most expensive way you can do it." It means that, from the off, the 360 stands a serious chance of being the machine that sees Microsoft turn the console profit corner. "If this platform gets to scale, we make money," confirms Bach in a tone that indicates he doesn't think it's much of an 'if'.

Robbie Bach has a simple, extraordinary claim to make for Xbox 360: "It will be," he says, unequivocally, "the most powerful games machine this generation"



Allard was determined that the 360 would give the 'seamless' impression of having been the work of one man, from top to bottom. Part of that look is the custom-designed 360 font, optimised to work as well in print and on the internet as it does on TV in-game

Not that these components are what will catch the average eye. That privilege is the preserve of the machine's svelte looks. Pale, curved and understated, its design is the result of Allard's decision to work with a sculptor from the beginning of the development process and to encourage both western and Japanese design teams to hone each other's ideas into something universally appealing. It's been a successful process, although those who revelled in the more aggressive stylings of the PS2 or the characterful chunkiness of the GameCube might accuse it of being bland. But then anyone who does dislike it doesn't need to be put off the machine. Separate fascias, which replace the entire front panel of the machine – buttons, flaps and all – will be available to buy for the console. Some will be game-specific, but others purely design lead. Prototypes on show include a quirky wood-veneer effect aimed at the Japanese market, a fantastically bold design which crams the word 'console' in fat red letters along the length of the panel, and some abstract patterns created by snowboard designers.

That front panel houses the chromed disc drawer, two memory card slots, an IR receiver for the optional DVD remote, the power button (deliberately made larger to make switching the machine on more irresistible) and a cover which hides two USB ports. The 360's controllers are

Minter and Microsoft: together at last

After the failure of Unity, Minter's vision takes centre stage



For many owners, their first experience of the Xbox 360 may not be a game at all, but, ironically enough, will come courtesy of a game design legend. Jeff Minter, famed for *Llamatron*, *Gridrunner* and the magnificent *Tempest 2000* and a long-term experimenter with light synthesisers, is to provide embedded visualisation software for the Xbox 360. Launching the music player will give access to an interactive visualisation which can be manipulated by up to four players. Minter is quick to dismiss the idea that this is something along the lines of the plain, repetitive lightshow that comes with the likes of Windows Media Player: "Those things are still using the kind of basic techniques I was using on the Jaguar's visualiser. This is an entirely new thing. The starting point is effectively the best visualiser in the world." Players then take control of a subtle element of each scene – one may work the camera, the other moderate the levels of feedback, another the underlying geometry. Together, they create a lightshow with such a high level of interaction and coordination that Minter likens it to being in a band, or playing together on one sophisticated instrument. It is, he says, the best thing he's ever done. And it seems that it may be the perfect expression of what Microsoft is trying to create with the 360 – a multiplayer, multimedia experience which may not be about gaming but is all about playing.



modelled very closely on the Xbox's Controller S – the main change being that the Black and White buttons have been converted to two shoulder buttons that sit above the two analogue triggers. The controllers are wireless, with rechargeable, removable battery packs. Although a separate battery pack charging station will be available as an extra, the main way to recharge the controllers will be by plugging them in to one of the USB sockets, which will also allow you to keep playing as they trickle charge. To avoid interference from other 360s, each controller can be bound to a specific Xbox by pressing a small binding button on the main console while holding down a similar button on the controller.

The top of the unit houses a removable 20Gb hard drive, which be included with every launch machine – 20Gb being the only configuration available. This isn't the optional extra that early reports predicted – the hard drive is as integral to the 360 as it was to the Xbox. The official line is that the drive is removable to allow you to take your saves, profiles and downloaded game content round to a friend's house to play on their 360, but there's no question that the configuration also makes it easy for Microsoft to release much larger drives later in the machine's lifetime.

So while this is the Xbox 2 everyone expected – more grunt combined with more elegance – it isn't the Xbox 2, it's the Xbox 360. Allard is adamant that the name change isn't a gimmick: "We couldn't name it Xbox 2 because it isn't in the same era. Sony put out two consoles in the same era – so PS1 and PS2 made sense. But we're jumping ahead." But are they? So far, what they've shown is what everyone expected – bar the question mark over the inclusion of a hard drive and the fantasy of the removable personal media player. Just why is it a revolution?

To understand that, and to understand Bach's seemingly outrageous claim, you need to understand more of what Microsoft is trying to accomplish with this console. It's a machine with a lot of thought – a lot of theory – behind it, which has led it in directions which are much harder to predict. The internal company mantra that explains the 360 is 'A living entertainment experience powered by human energy'. It's easy to mock, but those seemingly empty buzzwords contain everything you need to know about the machine and Microsoft's intentions for it.

The top of the unit houses a removable 20Gb hard drive, which will be included with every launch machine. The hard drive is as integral to the 360 as it was to the Xbox

The first theory is that gamers want to be connected. As well as a standard network connection, the 360 is also compatible with an optional wifi adapter. As is already becoming standard on Xbox games, this will allow for game updates and add-ons to be downloaded – both free and paid for by the 360's integrated payment system. Demos can also be made available, and the service may promise a new dawn for the concept of episodic games. The Live service will continue much as it is now. Gamertags – and even Live accounts – will be transferable to new machines, and subscriptions via pre-payment cards will be introduced to open the service up to those who don't have credit cards. If Xbox was proof of concept, 360 is intended to make Live omnipresent. The reasoning behind it, however, is a little odd. "The vast majority of gaming," says Bach, "is a social experience." It isn't, of course, even if you include every permutation of online and multiplayer gaming, alongside the kind of relaxed social play where a roomful of people sits and watches one person play. But while for many gamers the pleasure in playing is to be found from losing yourself in a game experience, Microsoft is energetically focused on expanding the social horizons of gaming.

The first part of the plan is the Gamer Profile unveiled at GDC. An expansion of the Gamertag, it allows players to add a little personal detail to their Live persona – an avatar, a location, a personal motto. This will be accompanied by a choice of Gamer Zone. These are still not finalised, but they are intended to reflect your attitude towards online gaming: are you a 'Pro' player, skilled and focused on winning, or an 'R'n'R' player more concerned with relaxing and making friends? This information is rounded out with your Gamer Score. All the gaming you do on your 360, online or offline, adds to this – and all sorts of achievements will contribute to it. Its intention is to ensure that no one needs to feel like a newbie when they venture online – even if all you've done is complete a few quests in *Kameo* and score a couple of silvers in *PGR3* you'll have a few points in the bank. It's slightly peculiar reasoning, since if the Gamer Score wasn't there in



The hard drive slots smoothly in and out of the top of the machine, and will be easily replaceable by higher-capacity models. At this stage there's no info about how you will transfer saves and content from your old drive to the newer, bigger model

the first place no one could tell who was new to Live or not, but it will no doubt become a badge of honour to more competitive players. The final aspect of your Gamer Profile is your star rating. After each online game, other players will be able to give you a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down depending on your Live conduct. It's not yet clear how open this system will be to abuse or manipulation, but there's no question that it'll be the section of your Gamer Profile other players check first. The overall intention is to humanise Live, to make it more approachable, and it's already clear that it's a more user-friendly process than nearly all other online gaming services.

But that contradiction which is at the heart of the Gamer Profile – trying to make things more accessible while emphasising the competitive, oneupmanship aspect of online play – forms an essential part of the 360's conception. Allard has a vision of online tournaments attracting major sponsors, able to offer major prizes for the victors. But to attract major sponsors, 360 will have to be able to offer major numbers, and Allard believes the machine can do that by attracting spectators. With enough 360s – and enough of them connected – he believes there's a real audience ready to tune into gaming events, to flick on to 360 Live as automatically as they'd flick to a different TV channel. The console's connected nature means that tournaments could effectively become broadcasts, and their popularity could mean gamers become stars. Plug in the 360's high-resolution camera (surely the least surprising peripheral ever, it will offer 640x480 video and high-quality stills) and viewers can watch you as you play. "Now it's not just about your thumbs any more," says Allard. "It's about what you're wearing, it's about how you handle the post-game interview, it's about how you handle the stress."

For many, that's a thought that will make their blood run cold. For others, it will sound like the usual pre-launch hyperbole – a technological











These early 'lifestyle' images indicate the clean, 20-something direction that MS is likely to use for 360 advertising

Those specs in full

A look under the 360's bonnet in accordance with Microsoft's official hardware data

CUSTOM IBM POWERPC-BASED CPU
- Three symmetrical cores at 3.2GHz each
- Two hardware threads per core
- One VMX-128 vector unit per core
- 128 VMX-128 registers per hardware thread
- 1Mb L2 cache

CPU GAME MATH PERFORMANCE
- Nine billion dot product operations per second

CUSTOM ATI GRAPHICS PROCESSOR
- 500MHz
- 10Mb embedded DRAM
- 48-way parallel floating-point dynamically scheduled shader pipelines
- Unified shader architecture

POLYGON PERFORMANCE
- 500 million triangles per second

PIXEL FILL RATE
- 16 gigasamples per second fillrate using 4x MSAA

SHADER PERFORMANCE
- 48 billion shader operations per second

MEMORY
- 512Mb GDDR3 RAM
- 700 MHz DDR
- Unified memory architecture

MEMORY BANDWIDTH
- 22.4Mb/s memory interface bus bandwidth
- 256Gb/s memory bandwidth to EDRAM
- 21.6Gb/s frontside bus

OVERALL SYSTEM FLOATING-POINT PERFORMANCE
- One Teraflop

STORAGE
- Detachable and upgradeable 20Gb hard drive
- 12x dual-layer DVD-ROM
- Memory unit support starting at 64Mb

I/O
- Support for up to four wireless controllers
- Three USB 2.0 ports
- Two memory unit slots

OPTIMIZED FOR ONLINE
- Instant, out-of-the-box access to Xbox Live features, including Xbox Live Marketplace for downloadable content, Gamer Profile for digital identity and voice chat to talk to friends while playing games, watching movies or listening to music
- Built in ethernet port
- Wifi ready: 802.11 A, B and G
- Video camera ready

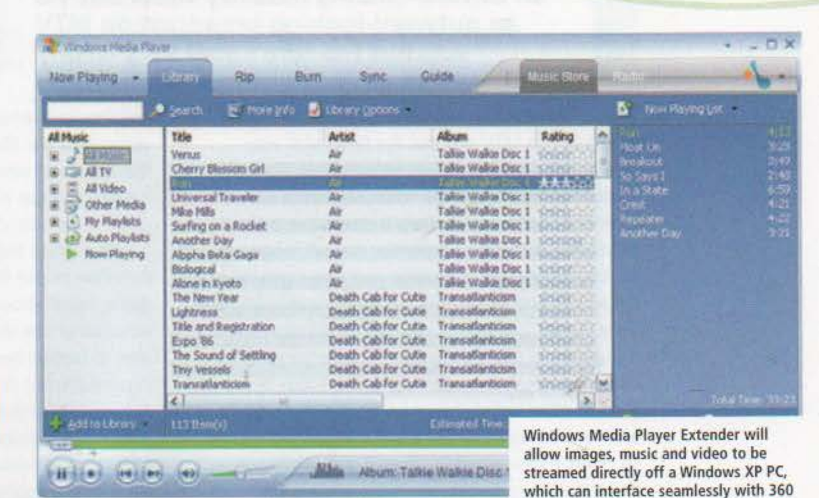
DIGITAL MEDIA SUPPORT
- Support for DVD-video, DVD-ROM, DVD-R/RW, DVD+R/RW, CD-DA, CD-ROM, CD-R, CD-RW, WMA CD, MP3 CD, JPEG Photo CD
- Stream media from portable music devices, digital cameras, Windows XP PCs
- Rip music to Xbox 360 hard drive
- Custom playlists in every game
- Windows Media Center Extender built in
- Interactive, full-screen 3D visualizers

HD GAME SUPPORT
- All games supported at 16:9, 720p and 1080i with antialiasing
- Standard definition and high-definition video output supported

AUDIO
- Multichannel surround sound output
- Supports 48KHz 16bit audio
- 320 independent decompression channels
- 32bit audio processing
- Over 256 audio channels

SYSTEM ORIENTATION
- Stands vertically or horizontally

CUSTOMISABLE FACE PLATES
- Interchangeable to personalise the console



Windows Media Player Extender will allow images, music and video to be streamed directly off a Windows XP PC, which can interface seamlessly with 360



The heart of the HD era

What will the 360 change about the games you play?

High-definition displays have so far been Microsoft's main focus in extolling the potential of the 360. For many gamers this may seem like something of a kick in the teeth, since wide availability and low prices are still some way off, particularly outside the US. There's no question, however, that the difference is breathtaking, and MS will require all games to be designed to widescreen, HD standard. All in all, the shift to widescreen may prove more significant, as it allows developers to change their approach to interface design and presentation from the off. Leading this field so far is *Ghost Recon 3* – a very early look shows visuals only slightly in advance of Xbox standards, but a freshness and dynamism of presentation which feels truly next generation. Games showing early signs of being more traditional graphical showcases include Epic's *Gears of War*, a thirdperson shooter which already looks to be pushing beyond the current PC benchmarks. However, expect E3 to be dominated by footage from *Basketball 2K6*. Early in-game demos show a single player animated to rendered cut-scene standards, cloth flowing and rippling in the moving ight, muscles moving smoothly under soft-sheened skin.

Microsoft's other mantra is customisability, and on that front developers are being required to include custom soundtrack support as standard. MS is also determined that the 360's games will be more inclusive, offering adaptive difficulty to ensure all players can see them through to the end. Hopefully, developers will be given the freedom to implement this dictat in a way which strengthens their games rather than hamstringing them.

Backward compatibility is still under active discussion, but is also still unconfirmed – the sense at the moment is that MS views it as desirable, but the practicalities may prevent it. This doesn't knock out the possibility of retrogaming on your 360, though – downloadable demos and minigames are very likely to mean that only a portion of your gaming time is spent on traditional, full retail releases. Those releases, however, are likely to cost. MS is clear it hopes to implement higher prices for the 360's games.

daydream that won't quite come to pass. But while there's no doubt it's only the minority of players who would actually relish being pro-gamer celebrities, there's also no doubt that a successful pro-gaming league, watchable on TV (albeit via console) could be the most significant step gaming could ever take into mainstream awareness.

And there's no doubt that the mainstream is where Microsoft wants the 360 to take it. The decision to launch the console not at an inward-looking industry show but via an outward-looking broadcast on MTV sets out the firm's stall very clearly. But while Microsoft believes that the 360's hardware can bring it the wider market, it doesn't believe its games can. Allard is dismissive of the possibility of trying to grow the market for games as they are today – elaborate and time-consuming. "How can you expand the appeal of something like *Tony Hawk*?" he asks. "You can't." What's interesting is that it's exactly the same conclusion Nintendo has drawn: gaming as it is today has already attracted all the people it can. Nintendo's answer is to reinvent gaming. Microsoft's answer is to creative new activities around gaming to get more people to participate in the experience.

The decision to launch the console not at an inward-looking industry show but via an outward-looking broadcast on MTV sets out the firm's stall very clearly

Allard takes *Tony Hawk* as a starting point and suggests different ways for non-gamers to get involved. A girl watching her brother play might be affronted by his avatar's poor choice of clothes and use her laptop to access the *Tony Hawk* website's clothing design tool. A few experimental efforts later, and she can upload a new T-shirt for him into the game. He wears it with pride, and his friends online like the look of it. And now the sister can go into business, selling her design via Live's peer-to-peer micropayments system (previously announced at GDC). "Is she playing the game?" asks Allard. "I don't know, but she's having fun." Mum can get in on the act, too. Not much of a gamer, but she's keen to watch her son compete in one of these pro-gaming tournaments. Using a photo of herself taken with the 360's camera, she can use a *Sims 2*-like system to create a recognisable avatar of herself, and get in position in the crowd, ready to cheer as her son comes on for his run.

It's a vision that raises dozens of questions (whether or not the sister is actually playing the game, what about the more humdrum question of whether or not she's paying for it? 360 may be able to involve her in the experience, but unless it can involve her in buying some hardware or some software, Microsoft isn't actually growing its market) so perhaps it's all to the good that this kind of hazy redefinition isn't where the 360's real mainstream appeal lies. Allard has already



Xbox 360: the games

Many titles are not yet confirmed, but here's a rundown of the projects currently in development

GAMES

- Avalon (Climax's vehicle combat game)
- Kameo: Elements Of Power
- Project Gotham Racing 3
- Gears Of War (Epic's thirdperson shooter)
- EPSN NBA Basketball 2K6
- Nomad Soul 2
- Need For Speed: Most Wanted
- Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 3
- The Darkness (Starbreeze)
- Infraworld (new Quantic Dream title)
- Condemned (Sega of America survival horror)
- Q? Entertainment (Tetsuya Mizuguchi) title
- Two Mist Walker (Hironobu Sakuguchi) RPGs
- Two Game Republic (Yoshiki Okamoto) titles
- Volition title
- Perfect Dark Zero
- Madden NFL '06
- Relic title

DEVELOPERS

- Phantagram
- Sega
- From Software
- Capcom
- Namco
- Konami
- Tecmo
- Rockstar
- BioWare
- Ubisoft

After undergoing endless evolutions, *Kameo* is the 360's flagship title. It has a dazzling level of detail, and plenty to crow about in terms of full water refraction and stunning particle effects. The strength of the gameplay, particularly in scenes like the mass battle below, couldn't be gauged from the demo



"I'm like a shipwrecked sailor in a rubber dinghy thousands of miles from any possible rescue, stubbornly paddling forward because there's nothing else to do but die."
Chris Crawford's reflections on interactive storytelling make for downbeat, sadly convincing reading

"I personally would like to be able to pistol-whip someone"
Bubble_Machine makes a comment that may or may not be related to discussion on Eidos' *25 To Life* forum

"Resisting all Japanese goods, long live the People's Republic of China"
Some hypocrisy courtesy of *Final Fantasy XI*'s more politically minded gil-sellers

"The US Army is basically clueless when it comes to making games and they don't know how to treat people, especially game developers."
So says an anonymous refugee from shooter-cum-Job-Centre *America's Army*

"The Ultimate Game Chair™ uses game vibration to shake the entire chair while you play. You feel the entire game! Next, it puts you INTO the game with 3D Stereo Sound speakers so you can hear the most subtle sounds in the game. You will feel like you are in the game!"
Ultimate Game Chair Inc sells its $790 peripheral, the perfect complement for those games you can no longer afford

Squaring the circle

An 'on' switch that's more than just a pretty disk

The first thing you notice about the 360 is it's eye-catching 'on' switch, and that's entirely intentional, as it's actually designed as a communication device. Look carefully and you'll see it's divided into four, and that a similar light ring appears on controllers. The rings can display different colours in different quadrants, which will help players know which player number they are without controller wires to guide them. When playing or watching a DVD, the ring of light can be configured to glow or flash to alert you to an incoming friend request or message – a subtler option than an onscreen message interrupting your enoyment. And those two systems are compatible, so that if four of you are playing together, a specific quadrant can flash to let a specific player know they have a message waiting.

Fast thinkers will notice a problem – that turning the machine on its side will spoil the purity of the system, but MS is one step ahead. Because lying the 360 flat blocks one of the main air vents, the machine already has to know its orientation so it can reroute air to a different fan configuration, and the ring will consequently be able to auto-adjust for a flat or upright 360. Just how useful a part of the 360 experience the ring of light will become is hard to gauge, but you can't fault the attention to detail.



announced that all 360 games will be able to use custom soundtracks stored by users on their hard drive: that's only the beginning.

The mainstream revolution starts with a new tier of Live service. Although a subscription will be needed to play full 360 games against other players online, access to the rest of the online service – patches, add-ons, demos, friends lists, paid downloads, even access to MMOs – will be free. With no pricing barrier and the increasing prevalence of broadband, Microsoft expects 360 Live membership to top 50 per cent of the installed base. If this goal is achieved, then that will change the face of console gaming forever, as developers can start to assume that the majority of their players will be able to access follow-up content – whether that means the appetising prospect of add-ons or the demoralising spectre of patches. Next comes communication. Alongside an elaboration of the messaging system that Xbox Live already allows (no mention is made, but it seems hard to believe that the 360 won't recognise USB keyboards), the availability of the camera, with its high-resolution video mode, signals the arrival of approachable, user-friendly video messaging in the living room. It may be *EyeToy Chat*'s baton, but the 360 seems far better placed to run with it.

Still not a revolution? As you chat you'll be able to play – download a simple parlour game, the like of which have made MSN Game Zone so popular, and you can play chequers or *Zuma* while you talk. If you have music stored on your hard drive then you can stream it to your friend, so you can both listen to the same music as you chat. If you haven't got music stored on your hard drive, then plug in your iPod (or any other digital music player) to the USB socket on the front of the 360 and stream it directly from that. Want to share photos with your friends? The USB socket can also be used to connect any digital camera, and images can be shown direct as a slideshow, or shared for all your Live friends to see. And, alongside the 360's native ability to play DVDs, there's no reason that the free Live service couldn't also be used to download music or movies. Suddenly, the idea that Microsoft might be looking to push enlarged 360 hard drives a year down the line doesn't seem so unlikely.

Microsoft is certain that these innovations will radically redefine the 360's market, but it's far too early to predict if that will be the case. They certainly seem to have the capability to transform the console's user base: more than ever before, every member of the household will have a reason to turn on that box under the TV. But whether that will translate into more people wanting to buy 360s – and whether those hardware purchases will translate into the software purchases (whether of games or entertainment products) which must surely still be the main source of the machine's profitability – remains to be seen. It's also a plan rich with ironies. Although it's some way off the multimedia hub that some people predicted, it's clear that the 360 is closer to being the Trojan horse that many feared (or hoped) the Xbox would be. And, thanks to chipping, the 360 will be less of a leap for some Xbox owners than others: many have been storing video and downloading content (albeit mostly illegally) for most of the Xbox's life.



Some may find the new 360 logo a little reminscent of the packaging used to sell the Crystal Xbox variant. The main unit's 'ring of light' is echoed on the controller to help users know which player number they are, and may yet reveal more sophisticated uses





This unfinalised version of the Gamer Profile shows how carefully the 360 is designed: the shape of the screen, or 'blade' mirrors the curve of the 360 itself

But even with all of this expansionist thinking, is there enough to justify Bach's assumption than the 360 will outdo its still-unmade rivals? For him, it's a simple argument. From now on, consoles are no longer a sum of their parts. Components only take you so far. The PS3 may be able to outdo the 360 on every spec sheet, but without the right tools, and the right services, it will be unable to match the experience the 360 has to offer. There's certainly some weight to that: Sony's reputation for its toolsets and developer support has failed to improve with the arrival of the PSP, and there can't be many holding out hope for a radical change of practice come next generation. There's also no question that Microsoft has proven its ability to create and sustain an online community – Sony's experience with PS2 has been patchy and Nintendo will be entering the arena as an almost complete novice. Microsoft may not be able to count on having the raw power advantage this generation, but it has earned the right to feel confident about its ability to exploit what it has to best advantage.

The PS3 may be able to outdo the 360 on every spec sheet, but without the right tools, and the right services, it will be unable to match the experience the 360 has to offer

Not that Bach is done: "Last generation we were thought leaders. This generation we plan to be market leader." That simple – no three-console plan. Microsoft intends to overtake Sony this generation. It's a bold statement – not least because, however much Bach wants to take the emphasis off components, there's no getting away from the fact that the most important part of Sony's new console will be the bit on the front that says 'PlayStation'. But with a head start, an aggressive timetable, a mainstream-friendly vision and a bedrock of gaming credibility, the 360 is unquestionably going to dent Sony's dominance. And it's hard not to feel that gaming will never be quite the same again.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

April Fools Day is a trying time, as press and precious internet forum-goers vie for the most outrageous yet believable prank, but Irem has outshone them all.

Poking fun both at itself and at industry trends in general, Irem announced not one but four new consoles in its Exidna hardware series: the ultra-slim 886Phz hi-res Xavy for the hardcore, the rideable swan O-Maru for the family-minded, the eyeshadow brush-controlled Compact for the ladies, and for the elderly the Stick – a walking stick with fold-out LCD and grip-based controls, doubling as an umbrella.

Irem also introduced a full compliment of launch titles, including *Hare Dokidoki Suikoden*, a body-pillow-controlled dating sim with 108 available girls.

Site:
Irem's Exidna consoles
URL:
www.yukihime.com/board/irem/site/



The front panel hides two USB ports, for recharging controllers and attaching cameras and iPods. Another is tucked round the back, along with digital AV out, ethernet port and wifi adapter sockets



Gizmondo finds second gear

With evolution comes revolution as the handheld's game production facility reveals ambitious plans for the future

It's tough to know what to make of the very 'proud' showpiece pictured above. By all accounts, the Farnborough airfield next door had something to say, which is why it's now indoors

The real-life Tomahawk missile that welcomes you to Gizmondo Studios in Farnborough has two things to say. Initially, with its gung-ho insignias that flick the ear of both Sony and Nintendo, it seems a crudely apt metaphor for the willy waving that's established the new handheld while earning it a dubious reputation. A lifestyle store in London, a launch studded with celebrities unaware of the technology and an introductory scattering of underdeveloped games haven't provided the best answer to the competing products that, between them, seem to have all the major bases covered.

But the more we appreciate that this is Gizmondo's game studio, detached from the marketing forces behind the above, the more we appreciate the difference in outlook. "We still have the angle," explains UK director **Erin Roberts**, "of being the Xbox in your pocket. But the key philosophy is to do stuff that no one else can." While others wrestle with the dilemma of selling the Gizmondo as both a desirable gadget and competitive console, its games division enjoys the comparatively luxurious task of defining a brand unfettered by market reputation and expectations. It's their job to justify the machine's integrated technology not only to the consumer electronics market but also to gamers. Its developers, largely retained during the acquisition of Warthog, have fast settled into the role of pedigree underdogs free from the mainstream industry's conservative fear of risk, but aware of the longterm strategy to which they've committed.

"We took over Gizmondo Studios a couple of months ago in mid-February," explains company president **Eric Petersen**, "and basically Gizmondo had made the change from a 2D to 3D chip so we completely overhauled how we wanted to do the games. Because of that, we now need to go head-to-head with Sony and Nintendo and we need to provide the content that allows us to do that." The company, he explains, has adopted a three-tiered approach: to internally develop original and competitive IP, to forge partnerships with thirdparties (having already enlisted Microsoft, Ubisoft and several unannounced others) and finally to secure licences to adapt other massmarket products.

Of the games we're shown today, the first is *Stickyballs*, a fantastically titled puzzler that'll be on Gizmondo store shelves within a month. The premise is entirely simple, giving the player increasingly complex patterns of coloured balls to knock about a table using a pinball-style plunger. Balls will stick if identically coloured and bounce off each other if not, each conjoined cluster moving with appropriate weight. Join every ball of a given colour and they disappear; repeat for every colour on the table and the level is over.

The company's rationale behind its dual support of Bluetooth and GPRS is the beautifully straightforward: "it works"

With trace elements of *Mercury* and *Monkey Ball* evident in the design, it looks pleasantly cheery and crisp, even rekindling memories of the Amiga's E-Motion. There's a brevity to this particular presentation that reflects, perhaps, a desire to move on to more interesting concerns. To a degree, it also suggests a game acquired to ensure that, as the starter pistol fires, a puzzle game is present on the blocks. The team are, in fact, ready to admit the presence of such a philosophy behind *Fathammer Classics*, the lacklustre trio that they themselves describe as 'checkbox games'. But as mental images arise of a forlorn Gizmondo sandwiched between the talking colanders and neoprene slippers of the Innovations catalogue, things begin to look up.

It begins innocuously with *Gizmondo Motocross*, a game as seemingly damned by its title as any other. It's a merry diversion that harks back to the days of *BMX Simulator*: again, vintage fodder designed to pack shelves that it'll likely never clear, but the rudimentary gameplay isn't where our interest lies. *Motocross* provides a fresh taste of Gizmondo's Bluetooth multiplayer. As Roberts reveals, the company's rationale behind its dual support of Bluetooth and GPRS is the beautifully straightforward: "it works." Unlike wifi, the protocol elect of the PSP and DS, GPRS is less infrastructure dependent, more cost effective and not quite as confined to sporadically placed branches of Starbucks. Bluetooth, similarly, has earned its stripes via the advocacy of the mobile phone industry. Accordingly, our link-up game of *Motocross* proves effortless to establish and stable from start to finish.

Chicane – a game-in-progress that's openly derivative of *Ridge Racer* – is visibly more ambitious. Though it lacks the supreme artistry and widescreen

Photoshock

Surprises at Farnborough continue beyond the screen

Augmented Reality is commonly regarded within the Gizmondo studio as something special – and for good reason. Of its first iteration, we're given a demonstration in the form of an onscreen 3D dungeon, navigable by simply tilting the console, its rear-mounted camera lens tracking movement. The possibilities for extending handheld interaction are enthralling. The next demonstration, however, is more impressive. A folder bearing a black-on-white insignia is placed on the desk. When displayed via the machine's camera, it's overlaid by the form of two characters – a vampire and an astronaut, naturally – that run along the symbol in the direction it's facing. Even when the console is shaken about, it tracks the image perfectly. How this will benefit future games isn't known, but the thinking behind it is definitely visionary.



Augmented Reality: it's not there in real life, but it all becomes clear when viewed via the Gizmondo hardware



Previously the work of ZedTwo, *Stickyballs* was later acquired by Warthog for release on PSP. Its subsequent transformation into Gizmondo Studios has given the quirky puzzler a new home

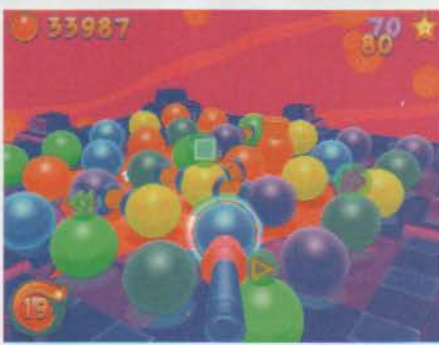


brilliance of Namco's title, as a technical showcase it's impressive. Draw distance, dynamic lighting and shadows are all comparable, even if the resolution isn't quite PSP standard, but it remains a damn sight more attractive than *Ridge Racer DS*. Its working title is dishearteningly charmless, but cryptic suggestions are made regarding developments yet to come. Thanks to a giant poster outside that reads *Chicane: Jenson Button Street Racing*, we gain a satisfying insight into what these might be, along with reassurance that Gizmondo's marketing machine is gradually building momentum.

Which brings us neatly to *Colors* – a game that, in the absence of a killer app, provides hope of massmarket recognition. Developed by Gizmondo's Stockholm studio, it has an overly familiar thirdperson camera, character and set of environments, but as development lead Mikael Astrom insists, is no *GTA* clone. "Really, the singleplayer is there to be enjoyed by everyone," he reveals. "The thirdperson action genre is one of the biggest-selling genres there is, hence why we wanted to make a game enjoyable for people who are used to that home experience. On top of that, though, we're adding Turf War [mode], which is where we really start utilising the different functionalities of the device."

Turf War offers a multiplayer component the likes of which, in technology of this sophistication at least, has never been seen before. It's an introduction to GPRS location-based multiplayer, and its potential is so compelling that simply having it described to you may substantially influence your perception of handheld gaming's future.

"It's like an MMO," Astrom continues, "the difference being that it's based on your actions, your movements, and not those of a character that runs around on 500 servers somewhere in Poland. How you move about during the day – where you

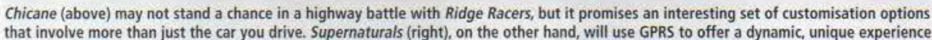


go to – will have an effect on how the game plays for you. It's all about how you get together with your friends and fight in areas that you walk through daily, against other people that walk through those same areas."

The degree to which this dissolves the barrier between gameworld and real world is impressive, to say the least, and behind it all is the Gizmondo's secret GPRS weapon: 'geo-fencing'. *Colors* divides the entire world into 30ft-squared zones, each with the potential to become a turf which then accrues value relative to how active it is. Through a singleplayer challenge that mimics the gang warfare familiar from *San Andreas*, players must build up an empire one turf at a time. With money earned during both game modes, turfs are then fortified with AI homies armed

Johnny Whatever is the studio's first bid to create an IP that can take Gizmondo's fight to Sony and Nintendo. A punk rock actioner with its tongue embedded in its cheek, the game allows players to string musical notes into aggressive combos





Chicane (above) may not stand a chance in a highway battle with *Ridge Racers*, but it promises an interesting set of customisation options that involve more than just the car you drive. *Supernaturals* (right), on the other hand, will use GPRS to offer a dynamic, unique experience

with upgradeable weaponry. Though there's no PvP, players are notified if and when their turf is under siege. "We had to find a way for the player to win or lose their turf when they're not online," explains development lead **Mikael Lindgren**.

It's difficult to ascertain the experience that will emerge from *Colors*, especially in the long term and with such an initially small userbase. But while our concerns instinctively veer towards those of established industry models, Gizmondo is uniquely positioned outside of that realm, towards the more experimental arena of 'communicative gaming'. While N-Gage sought to couple the two worlds without ever combining them, here that integration is deemed essential, and *Colors* chooses to honour that through the refined dialogue of tagging.

"One thing that's common in Europe at the moment is texting," explains Astrom, "and texting is all about communication and entertainment. It's your little moment of fun whenever you're bored. You're reaching out to someone to get attention or piss someone off, whatever. It's the same thing with Turf War." It's important, before he continues, to realise that a Swedish accent, when twisted around English words, can sound uncannily Mancunian. "Imagine you're standing waiting for a bus. You jump on and while you're going to work, you're travelling through areas that are held by rival crews. So you just tag 'You're all fucking twats' all along the way to work. It's going to piss off everyone, so you at least know you're reaching out."

Apparently, one Gizmondo investor branded *Colors* a game of 'naughty Monopoly'. For the two Mikaels at least, that definition has stuck, albeit in a light-hearted capacity. But the similarity is easy to see, and it's impossible to tell if something that's been tried and tested only in European SMS triangulation games will achieve sufficient proliferation to realise its potential. If *Colors* falls short, however, then perhaps *Supernaturals* won't.

"Texting is about communication and entertainment. It's your little moment of fun whenever you're bored. It's the same with Turf War"

Described by Roberts as an "evangelical title," *Supernaturals* is far more attuned to the micro-gameplay that, for now at least, sits most happily amid Gizmondo's suite of applications. Set in a fantastical Europe inspired by the Cthulhu mythos, it's a GPRS enabled take on *Pokemon Stadium*. The implications are that the creatures you'll find in, say, rural Kent will be different to those you'll find in downtown Manhattan. Each global region will be characterised by its own shops, environments and collectable items, while the creatures themselves will behave appropriately. For example, you're in America and it's a full moon; you can summon from your grimoire the werewolf you acquired back in London and its power will be duly increased.

With an initial cast of 200 customisable creatures, fully fledged storyline and a lobby system provisionally and suggestively titled Gizmondo Live, *Supernaturals* inhabits a modest genre, but looks set to offer a complete experience – something the platform desperately needs. There's also something irresistibly fresh about referring to 'yourself' without the vicarious association of an avatar or game presence. It reflects a gamer-centred philosophy designed to occur around the daily routine, filling its idle gaps while benefiting from its transient nature.

It's reassuring that, as our attention is drawn to the horizon, there's plenty of scenery to enjoy. *Johnny Whatever* looks to be the company's first stab at securing a serviceable IP and isn't without character or visual clout. Hardware support, meanwhile, continues to improve the machine's ability to record and play video and music. We're shown tech demos of Augmented Reality – a speculative but innovative exploration of camera/game integration that, we're assured, will one day be fulfiled under the name *Agaju*. We'd like to think its noble intent would ease Gizmondo into gamers' pockets and sponsor its quest to revolutionise mobile gaming. Hopefully E3 will provide further evidence that it can.



Chicane (above) and *Johnny Whatever* (left) represent far more complete packages than the Gizmondo launch titles, marking a step up from idle experimentation with 3D to more marketable, competitive products. And not before time



INTERVIEW

Revenge of the Smith

With Killer 7 being as off-the-rails as it is on-rails, and the game on-track for imminent release, it's time for Capcom to shed some light on its dark horse





Defeated enemies detonate into a swirling cloud of Thick Blood (top), which can be stocked to provide health refills or converted into Serum, to upgrade attributes. The Heaven Smiles (above) begin to diversify beyond simple, shambling hazards soon into the game

What with *Killer 7*'s lunatic art direction, its glorious freakshow of ultraviolence, and a plot that's as topical as any anti-terrorism FPS around, there's no shortage of questions to be put to producer **Hiroyuki Kobayashi**.

Capcom's action games usually focus on just one or two playable characters, but *Killer 7* has, well, seven: has it been a challenge to make them all as striking and memorable as 'typical' Capcom heroes?

There weren't any particular challenges as such, but we were very conscious of that fact that all seven playable characters needed strong personalities and must be fun to play. My favourite is Dan Smith, but I also like MASK De Smith. When you clear the game, you can understand why director Goichi Suda loved MASK so much – you can really feel it.

Is *Killer 7* the most experimental title you've worked on at Capcom? And, if it's received well, would you like Capcom to produce further *Killer 7* titles, or would you like it to remain a unique release?

Capcom has made plenty of experimental titles before, but the difference here is that we've dealt with *Killer 7* by outsourcing it to Grasshopper [Manufacture, home of the game's director]. And, yeah, if it sells, we'd like it to become a franchise.

***Resident Evil 4* went through four revisions before it was completed. How many different revisions has *Killer 7* been through since its conception?**

Killer 7 hasn't really gone through the same process as *Resident Evil 4* – which was changed completely – but has taken three years to complete because producer Shinji Mikami and director Goichi Suda are both great creators, and they had to build up a foundation of trust as they worked together on the game.

The GameCube titles you've overseen – *PN03*, *Killer 7*, *Resident Evil 4* – all have a dark, mature and stylish feel to them, which is something that many people say is more suited to the Xbox or PlayStation2 markets. How do you feel about the way the GC market is viewed?

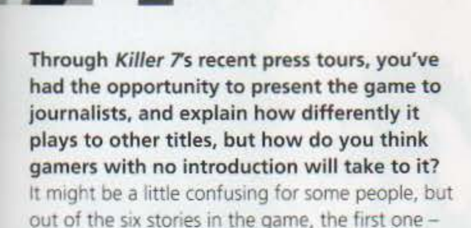
That's right. This game would, generally, be best suited to PS2 players, but from my point of view, and Capcom's point of view, Nintendo is a company dedicated to gamers, which is why we wanted to work with them. When development began three years ago, we had a discussion with them, and Nintendo indicated it would like to expand its market into more mature territory, and they approved the violence and the content.

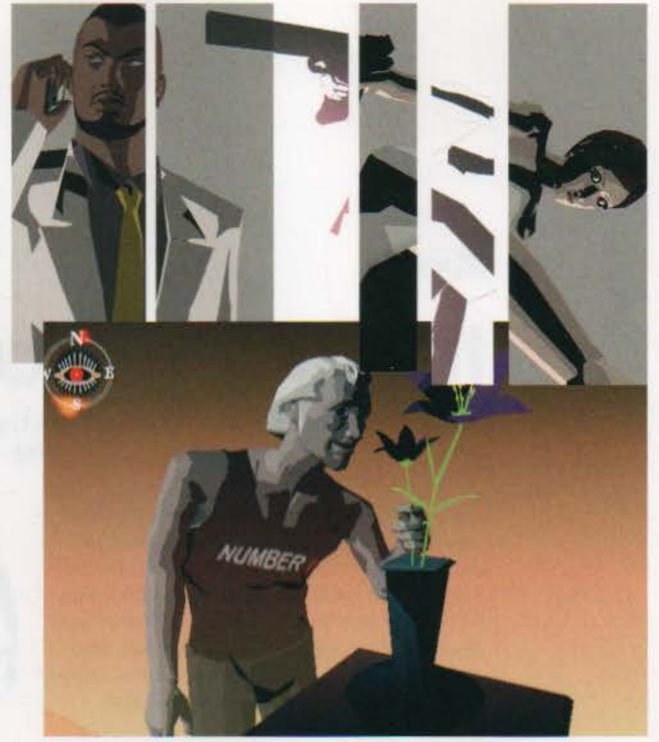
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Kobayashi began at Capcom as programmer on the original *Resident Evil*, and his CV has since taken in roles on *Devil May Cry* and *RE4*. His longest time spent at the office non-stop? 'About three days'









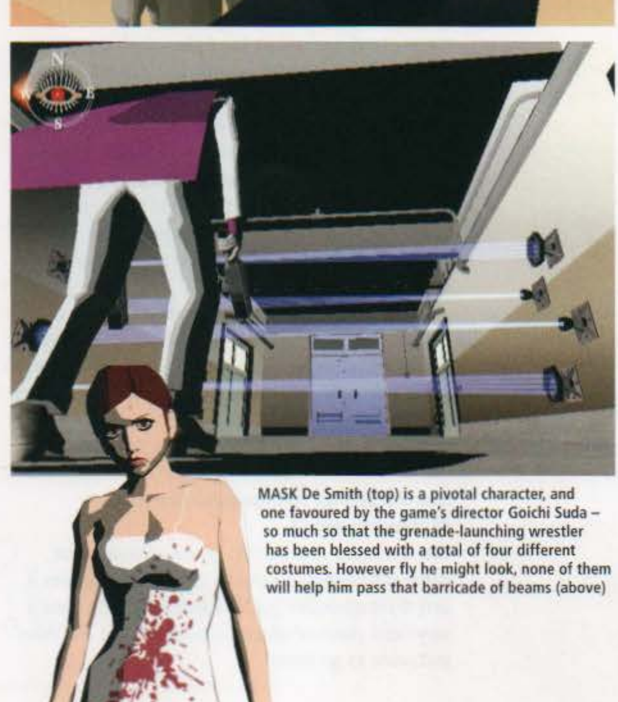
Through *Killer 7*'s recent press tours, you've had the opportunity to present the game to journalists, and explain how differently it plays to other titles, but how do you think gamers with no introduction will take to it?
It might be a little confusing for some people, but out of the six stories in the game, the first one – Angel – is quite short. As long as you clear that particular story, I'm confident that players will begin to like and understand the game.

You've said that *Killer 7* was kept simple to allow players to focus on the art and setting, which seems similar to the realisation of a game such as *Rez*. How crucial is this simplicity of control, and do you think other games will mimic its approach?
Personally, I don't think *Killer 7* will be copied in the future, because it does need an incredible creator to push its ideas through. As for the control method itself, that was a deliberate choice on behalf of the director; he wanted to present the game in an understandable way, so that the company that backed him could see past the craziness of *Killer 7*, so therefore I don't think that this type of game will ever become established as a genre.

When we released *Biohazard* on the PS1, everyone complained about the controls, but after it sold so many copies, it became a norm. So, unless *Killer 7* sells as many, we don't think it will be accepted as a gameplay norm.

***Killer 7* deals with themes of politics, terrorism, bomb threats and extreme violence – were you concerned how the gaming audience would react to it in the current real-world climate?**
As a creator, Goichi Suda is quite sensitive about what's going on in the world, especially regarding relationships between the US and Japan, so he wanted to reflect that in the game.

As for the players, however, if they're sensitive about political issues, they may be able to see that, but for most players the setting will be just a backdrop for the game and nothing more.



MASK De Smith (top) is a pivotal character, and one favoured by the game's director Goichi Suda – so much so that the grenade-launching wrestler has been blessed with a total of four different costumes. However fly he might look, none of them will help him pass that barricade of beams (above)

Newswire



PSP lines up Euro debut

SCEE has finally got around to confirming something that sensible speculation has long since converged on – its PSP will see release in Europe on September 1, retailing for €249 (£179). As with the US launch, it's an obligatory Value Pack bundle, consisting of those essential peripherals required to prevent ownership of the handheld turning into a begrudging smallprint shopping list: carry case, 32Mb Memory Stick Duo, battery, headphones and AC adaptor. But, unlike the Korean PSP launch, there's no rumour of it coming ready-equipped with web browsing software. And, no, we don't mean a free copy of *WipeOut Pure*.

OUT THERE



THE SIDEWAYS CODE

Since Atari stepped on the racing genre's brakes with *Hard Drivin'*, a niche has existed for the authentic driving simulator. Such games place less emphasis on the sensation of speed than on the illusion of being sat within the bodywork of a real car. Earlier, in 1984, the same company's *TX-1* had marked the first time that three monitors had been linked to provide a faux windscreen and a panoramic view of the world 'outside'. Sega's *Ferrari F355 Challenge* later refined the technology, Microsoft demoing a home implementation (for those of limitless wealth) to promote this month's *Forza Motorsport*. But now *Menkyo No Tetsujin* (*Sega Driving School*) – formerly a genuine training tool – combines the two ideas for the benefit of Japanese arcades. The game does save a driver's progress to their IC Card, however, so to those with the compulsive urge to carve *Initial D*-style drifts into sleepy suburban roundabouts, beware.



CONVERSION

Wake up and smell the Xbox

Valve breaks silence on its much anticipated console conversion

While PC gamers await the *Aftermath* (see page 39) Dr Breen will soon be welcoming a new trainload of citizens to pre-cataclysm City 17, this time from the Xbox community. Valve's **Doug Lombardi** reveals what kinds of changes they can expect: "Our goal was to deliver as true a version of *Half-Life 2* as possible, without having to make excuses for things lost in translation. We have added a few things. Streaming technology has been implemented for loading its very large and dense maps; enhanced lighting and improved effects will also be realised." Porting *Half-Life* to PS2 and *Counter-Strike* to Xbox has taught the team much about what does and doesn't work on a console, and the Xbox controller is "the best starting point for firstperson action games on any console." And what of the next-generation formats? "They look very promising, and we're exploring bringing both game content and technologies to some or all of them."



The most significant change in the Xbox version appears to be a drop in texture detail

INTERVIEW

In from the cold

The director of Fahrenheit discusses the risks and rewards of interactive storytelling

David Cage and his Quantic Dream studio made their statement of intent with the shifting storylines and 41-strong playable cast (not least David Bowie) of 1999's sci-fi thriller *The Nomad Soul*. In the upcoming *Fahrenheit* (see also page 40), Cage has new stories to tell, new characters to voice them and new narrative devices to experiment with in modern-day New York.

How did the concept for *Fahrenheit* grow after you completed *The Nomad Soul*?

The real starting point for *Fahrenheit* was: 'Everybody likes movies or books. But not everybody enjoys games. Why?' A lot of people don't consider games to be serious media. I took an interest in games when I started seeing them as an incredible platform to express visions, tell stories and offer a totally unique and immersive creative experience.

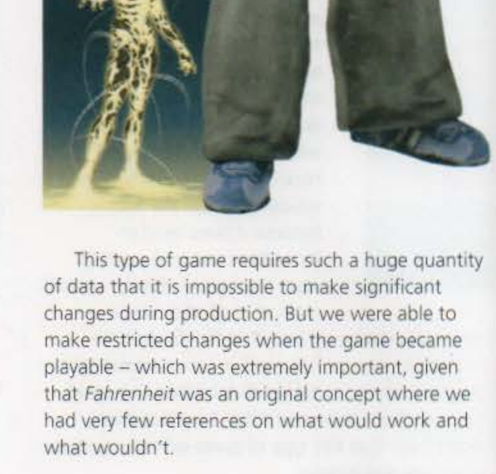
I wondered about how I could tell a story in an interactive form: a real, solid, consistent story as the core experience of a game. I wanted the player to directly 'play' with the story, almost in a physical sense – where interactivity and story would merge together without sacrificing one to the other.

Did the design change over the course of development?

The last thing you want to do on an innovative game is to design on the fly. Innovation requires a very tight schedule: you absolutely need to have a very clear vision of where you want to go and how you want to go there.



Fahrenheit's splitscreen storytelling gives the player a very strong sense of being a real character in a real environment, as well as providing sutble but crucial gameplay cues



This type of game requires such a huge quantity of data that it is impossible to make significant changes during production. But we were able to make restricted changes when the game became playable – which was extremely important, given that *Fahrenheit* was an original concept where we had very few references on what would work and what wouldn't.

Even working on an original concept, do you try to stay aware of the directions other titles are following?

I do try to keep an eye on everything and play as much as I can, but to be honest, I play more from a professional standpoint than for personal pleasure. I feel less and less interest for games, just because most of them are designed for ten-year-old kids, and I don't have the same interests now. I've played games for 20 years, and I have the feeling that this industry makes the same games over and over again. We change the technology, but the nature of the experience is exactly the same. Look at *Resident Evil 4*: the game is visually and technically astonishing, but how is it really different from *Resident Evil 1* on the PS1?

I feel the need for richer and deeper content, aimed at the adult I am today. Very few games really explore the different ways of playing with a




Fahrenheit has been a labour of love for Cage and his team: the shift to Atari has brought some frustrations, such as the removal of the game's sex scenes, but also some improvements, like a cleaner UI



story, so I was much more inspired by movies than by games.

The game's development cycle has been convoluted – what's this been like?

The worst experience on this type of project is doubt: I got very depressed a couple of times, had some very serious doubts about what we were doing. Would people want to play a game where there is no gun and no car, where the gameplay would be based on dealing with choices and emotions rather than zombies and ammo?

I don't know if gamers will love *Fahrenheit* or hate it, but I am now convinced that there are some interesting answers to the problem of interactive storytelling in this game. And creating an original concept is the most exhausting, frightening, but also most exciting thing you can do as a developer.

What was the situation with your former publisher, Vivendi?

We signed with Vivendi mainly because three key people in the company showed a lot of passion for the title. After a year of development, those three had left Vivendi, and the company had stopped production in Europe – after that, we felt it was not the right publisher for us any more.

Are you finding the relationship with Atari better for *Fahrenheit*?

It's extremely interesting and constructive for the product. They've assigned us an experienced and supportive American producer, which was definitely a good decision – it helps reduce the usual communication gap between the US and Europe. It's very rare to see so much enthusiasm for a project within a publisher: they are sincerely excited about the game, and can see how it is really different.

It's very important that publishers like Atari take risks on original concepts. This industry tends to forget that it's always the first one to create something new who really takes the profits from it. The followers just get what's left. Think of *The Sims*, *Resident Evil* or *GTA* – there is a bonus to innovate. This industry is just cannibalising itself by recycling the same concepts, when it can in fact be extraordinarily creative. It is a wonderful place to invent new ideas, new worlds and new concepts.

Have any other titles impressed you with their efforts to alter the way games present themselves to the player?

A lot of games impressed me with their technology, but very few tried to have a real, deep, *new* approach to interactivity and the relationships between the player and the experience. One of my favourite games is *Ico*, because of the ways it builds the complex emotion of empathy.

With Fahrenheit, I have tried to make the player feel sad, make him smile, make him care for the characters and share their lives. I thought of it as an 'emotion simulator'

With *Fahrenheit*, I have tried to make the player feel sad, make him smile, make him care for the characters and share their lives. During development, I thought of it as an 'emotion simulator', like a rollercoaster based on emotional immersion.

How would you describe Quantic Dream's strategy as an independent, creative studio?

There will always be games that are 'toys', based on destroying and killing, but we believe there will be increasing space for creators with a vision to share. Both will exist, but if the industry wants to expand its market, it will have to offer content with more depth, diversity and richness.

From a business point of view, we believe publishers will understand that this industry needs new talent, and that this talent can only be found in smaller creative groups like ours.

OUT THERE



THE WORLD IS IN YOUR HANDS

If the likes of *Mercury* and *Smartbomb* signify PSP developers' willingness to innovate, *Adventure Player* suggests that From Software is hell-bent on doing so. Not just a handheld 2D explorer, the game features a PC-based toolkit through which budding architects can build their own games. The menu-based foundations are set in stone, but the scripts, sounds, text and graphic elements can all be customised without a shred of coding ability. Finished games can then be shared via email, Memory Stick or publisher Genki's homepage (this last point, however, has yet to be finalised). It's sadly unlikely that *Adventure Player*, together with its three included games, will make it to US or European shores. Western gamers see too few examples of developers thinking outside the box, even if two boxes – a console and a computer – are subsequently required in this case.

What would you like to see *Fahrenheit* achieve? And where do you see yourself going from here?

I hope to prove that a game based on interactive storytelling can be as fun as any other kind of game. I hope it will be commercially successful – to demonstrate that interactive storytelling has real potential as a genre, to get new talents to explore it, and to prove that innovation can also be profitable. I am currently working on two new projects, both very different from *Fahrenheit* – one is *Nomad Soul 2*. That will be a new kind of experience for me: usually, when I start a new project, no one believes in it, which to me means it is an interesting idea. With *Nomad Soul 2*, everyone seems to think it is a good idea just hearing the title! I would like to explore some ideas I have about procedural storytelling in an open world. I know that there is a strong community of fans that enjoyed *Nomad Soul*, so we will do our best to surprise them.

EIEF
Edinburgh Interactive Entertainment Festival

EVENT

Edinburgh Edge Award nominations line up

Ten games enter the running for gaming's only gong voted for by the industry and public alike

Rome: Total War takes an old idea and brings to it a level of detail and scale which gamers have always dreamed of


Oddworld's Stranger ranks as one of the most charismatic, complex and downright beautiful game characters ever created

The third Edinburgh Interactive Entertainment Festival is taking gaming to what, for a month each year, is the world's cultural capital. EIEF05, from August 10-14, includes an industry conference, a series of game screenings, and Go Play Games, which showcases new titles to the paying, playing public.

An integral part of the festival is the **Edge** Award, which focuses on the ten games of the last year which have done most to redefine our expectations of what games are capable of – whether by risking new innovations, or by setting new standards of traditional excellence. This shortlist is then considered by a panel of judges drawn from all sectors of the videogame world – including developers, academics and journalists. Uniquely, the same shortlist is also open to the gaming public, as **Edge** readers and festival goers will be able to have their say on which they feel deserves the award. Keep an eye on www.edge-online.com for details regarding the judging panel and ways to vote.

The winners will be drawn from the following: *Catch! Touch! Yoshi* (Nintendo), *Daigasso! Band Brothers* (Nintendo), *Darwinia* (Introversion Software), *Donkey Kong: Jungle Beat* (Nintendo), *God Of War* (Sony Santa Monica), *Half-Life 2* (Valve), *Lego Star Wars* (Traveller's Tales), *Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath* (Oddworld Inhabitants), *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom's Production Studio 4) and *Rome: Total War* (The Creative Assembly). More details at www.eief.co.uk

Continue

New hardware
New hardware, new hardware, new hardware

More Half-Life 2
It may only be eight hours' worth, but, hey

Free Xbox Live
Throw away your phone and use your Xbox 360

Quit

Random rubbish blogs
No, we haven't seen them, and no, we don't plan to

Pre-E3 meltdown
Aka when videogame developers lose the plot

The summer
With all this happening, who has time to go out?



DRIVING THE GAME

The book to get if your coffee table has a spoiler

Following the recent trend, as seen with *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2*, comes another 'making of the game' book, in this case for *Gran Turismo 4*. Playing up to the eye-candy nature of fast cars and a game with a photo mode, this is much more of a coffee table book than a detailed exposé of the development process. But for any *GT* screenshot and render junkies, it's a lavish treat. 170 pages long, it gives an overview of how the game was put together as well as page after page of motion-blurred, super-shiny gloss and details on some of 650 cars in the game, including the Mazda RX-8, McLaren F1 and Nissan Skyline GTR.

The problem, however, lies in the text. There's something of a pooterish quality to it, as if Hartas is struggling to get any critical distance. *GT4* may be a fine-looking game, but it's certainly not perfect. So issues such as the continuing decision not to include damage, *GT3*'s pop-up or the prolonged delays and uncertainty over the online mode are swept under the carpet. Creator Kazunori Yamauchi's role is also overplayed to such an extent that it might be assumed he models the cars and does a bit of coding on the side, as well as designing packaging and doing all the PR. Yet there are some interesting snippets, notably photos of Yamauchi and his 70-strong team at work. There's even an ironic view of the on-site dormitories for when it's time to really 'eat, breathe and sleep *GT*' – a maxim that describes the audience of this book.



RUBIK SPACE

From the cities of the world to your house, the invasion is coming home

The secretive Frenchman, known only as Invader, spends his time travelling around the world's major cities carrying out his so-called invasions – well, actually he's sticking *Space Invaders* mosaics to the walls, but you get the picture.

In his third photobook project, he takes a look back at the locations of some past triumphs; the Invader iconography has spread from his Parisian base to Hong Kong, Tokyo, Lyon, Osaka, Manchester, New York and LA. But unlike urban restylists such as Banksy, whose graffiti mixes humour with a sharp shock of cultural polemic, Invader's work is purely symbolic. There's nothing but a Space Invader figure. In fact, as every invasion is followed by the release of a map showing the position of all the mosaics, each invasion is akin to tourism for the game generation.

And maybe that's why he's trying to move on his oeuvre. Recent developments include the Invader shoe – a trainer with an invader blocked into the sole. This can be inked up and then walked around the streets. Another new tack has been invaders created on or using numbers of Rubik Cubes – hence the book's title. It's the least visually strong wave of his art, though, because by definition it has to be gallery-based. As for the future, he promises a sticker theme. There's also a taster of a new trend he's attempting in Paris, which is to wrap statutes in red invader tape. It's hardly Cristo, but at least it's a development.



A DEVELOPER'S DIARY

Tameem Antoniades of Ninja Theory continues his next-gen push

It's now coming up to the end of 2004. The last year has seen a fair bit of action: we wowed publishers with a demo of our next-gen game, *Heavenly Sword*; we came within a hair's breadth of signing a publishing deal twice; we went bust once; bought back the business and re-emerged as Ninja Theory. Now it would nice to cap it all off with a publishing deal.

By the way, when news went out that we were about to disappear, I must thank **Edge** for its support. Here's a touching email from the magazine: "How's it going? Are we still on to continue the diary?"

It made me chuckle and think of Steve McQueen in Papillion where he is floating in the middle of the big blue ocean atop a bag of coconuts screaming: "I'm still here, you bastards!" The first thing we decide to do as an independent is to get the bums on seats we need to get things moving. And why not: if we don't expand our bumcheeks, publishers may not dive in, and if we don't sign a deal, we're screwed anyway. Yep, we're living the dream!

Years ago, a developer brought in a bunch of guys from the local Job Centre to sit around and pretend to work while a prospective publisher was shown around

I've heard there's another enterprising solution to the bums-on-seats problem: the story goes that, years ago, a developer brought in a bunch of guys from the local Job Centre to sit around and pretend to work while a prospective publisher was shown around. The publisher went away warm and fuzzy knowing that there were enough good people there to do the job!

Anyway, over the next few weeks and months, we manage to hire good people from some of the finest dev houses in the UK and from as far afield as Korea, taking our head count up from the 22 we've been stuck at for the last year to 32.

Meanwhile, in the big bad world, a couple of publishers love us again now that Argonaut's out of the picture. They figured that Argonaut's time had come and didn't want us, together with their cash, to suddenly disappear. We originally became part of Argonaut for their publisher relationships and financial security. Oh, the irony!

Our publisher choice is made very easy...

Publisher #1: "We want you to make the game that you are passionate about. Make it memorable. Be ambitious."



This concept art shows the epic and colourful feel Ninja Theory is aiming to capture with *Heavenly Sword*. The developers' signing of a deal with a publisher brings this concept a large step closer to reality

Publisher #2: "We're waiting for our American office." You needn't have bothered as the American 'Office' is terrible! Bada-boom-tish!

Publisher #1 it is, then.

Contract negotiations start up again, but drag on and on as these things inevitably do. Twice now, 'done deals' have been pulled from under us at the last minute, so I smother my hopes before they pull a fast one on me again.

I need to take my mind off the agony of not knowing whether *Heavenly Sword* will ever see the light of day. I long for some 13-year-old to play the game and then post his critique on the internet forums: 'Da graffix is gay' or the perennial classic: 'This game Ownz JoO!'

I so need a break.

Six months earlier, I had booked a three-week holiday over Christmas and New Year. Travelling to Hong Kong, Tokyo and Melbourne is just what I needed. A lot of people travel to other countries to see the major tourist sights thinking that they are seeing culture. My version of culture involves chatting, eating and getting lashed with the locals. So on Christmas Eve in Oz, while getting lashed with the locals, a text message comes through from Mike: "We've signed the deal!" Hooray! Cheers! Glug! Glug! Glug! I sit down in disbelief that it's finally happened. I check the message again, this time scrolling down to read the rest: "...now it's just up to them to sign on their side!" Damn you, Hope! You tricked me again!

Back from holiday we can do nothing but sit and wait which gives me plenty of time to rant, typically like this: "If this falls through, I'm through with games!" "If it's this bloody hard to get a next-gen game off the ground, how is anyone going to survive?" "Everyone's so petrified that, by not wanting to make a wrong move, they aren't moving at all!" Rant, rant, rant...

One night in January 2005, Nina gets off the phone: "We're done." We call a meeting the next morning. Lots of worried faces walk in. Cheering, clapping and gasps of relief ensue. We cut the day short and head out for a celebratory drink or two with the Cambridge locals. "We're still here, you bastards!"



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

The Machine

media.k10k.net/issues/issue077/the_machine.html

The Machine, by German designer Tilman, scrapes an intriguing flake from Alternate Reality Gaming's crown without tapping the crazed obsession of its brain. It explores the notion that anything our minds take for granted is a potential cipher, its assumed meaning corruptible for the purpose of concealment or, in this case, fleeting pleasure.

Beyond its mock OS lies a series of simple tests that toy with our commonplace interactions with computers. The presentation may be deliberately overcomplicated, but the solutions are so simple that to describe them would also spoil them.

It'll be interesting to see if the mileage and depth of this idea is extensible, allowing for a more substantial, perhaps saleable ARG-style game that excludes the alarming possibility of baffling objet d'art falling through your letterbox at two in the morning. We do, after all, have Microsoft Game Studios to blame for fuelling the phenomenon in the first place.



Sega spreads Love in Japan

A new coin-op proves that lightning can strike twice

Those who said that Sega's incredible success with its beetle-battling *Mushiking* coin-op and range of related merchandise (it has sold a staggering 150 million trading cards to date in Japan) was a one-off may have to eat their words: the company appears to have done it again with *Love And Berry* (above). Proof of this came at the company's GameJam 2005 event at the end of March in Tokyo, where fans queued for up to an hour to get some time with the coin-op. Unlike *Mushiking*, however, which appeals to all children of all types and ages, *Love And Berry* is firmly for girls, mixing a 'dressing up dolls' theme with a rhythm-action section inspired by BeMani titles.

Though it seems to have the kids' arcade gaming market sewn up (the popularity of *Mushiking* is such that a comic strip has been produced, with an animation series to follow soon), Sega is faring less well in other areas, something illustrated at GameJam by the absence of visitors to the area offering *The Rumble Fish* on PS2, and a distinct lack of interest in the company's Atomiswave coin-ops (indeed, rumours suggest that Sammy's cheap board may soon be discontinued).

Initial D Arcade Stage ver. 3 and *Virtua Fighter Final Tune* tournaments gave Sega's arcade divisions some cheer, with hundreds of fans from across Tokyo turning up to take part, paving the way for new iterations of both series in the future.



Mostly thanks to children, *Mushiking* (left) is Sega's most popular IP in years – it introduced 40 new items of related merchandise at GameJam. Meanwhile, *Initial D* attracted older gamers (above)

INCOMING

Announcements and updates

Prince Of Persia 3

FORMAT: GC, PC, PS2, XBOX
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
EXPECTED: Q4 2005



The sight of stealth kills may rub sand in the wounds of those left smarting by *Warrior Within*'s jagged edges, but *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory* proved good things can come in Ubi's threes

Metronome

FORMAT: TBA
PUBLISHER: TBA
EXPECTED: 2006



Dark City: The Musical, anyone? Audio becomes the weapon in Team Tarsier's prototype adventure, the player recording in-game sounds and using them to seduce, confuse, distract and destroy

Star Wars Battlefront 2

FORMAT: PS2, XBOX
PUBLISHER: LUCASARTS
EXPECTED: Q4 2005



American developer Pandemic launches its Star Wars toyset into orbit, with fighter-to-fighter space battles and capital ship boardings: all it needs now is an "IT'S A TRAP!" voice macro

Age Of Conan: Hyborian Adventures

FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: FUNCOM
EXPECTED: 2006



Funcom jumps from the sci-fi of *Anarchy Online* to the pulp fantasy of Robert E Howard: Conan's most promising (or concerning) aspect is a detailed, realtime combat system

Rebelstar: Tactical Command

FORMAT: GBA
PUBLISHER: NAMCO
EXPECTED: AUGUST



Advance Wars and *Final Fantasy Tactics*' dominance of GBA strategy gaming is to be challenged by the Gollop brothers' combination of tactical shooter nous and a chibi-style makeover

Tomb Raider: Legend

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX
PUBLISHER: EIDOS
EXPECTED: 2005



Crystal Dynamics suggests a more 'natural structure' for Croft in this rediscovery of the series' roots. Can its soul searching uncover a control system as smooth as its heroine's looks?

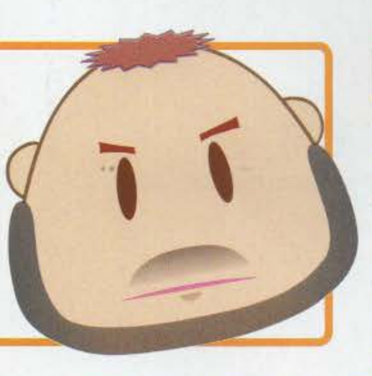
Exactly the sort of kit that gets Bardo's juices flowing. It's not difficult to get started – Holgas are online at reasonable prices

SOMETHING ABOUT

Japan

The analogue generation

Game producer Brick Bardo thinks he can picture the future



About a year ago, I developed a real passion for cameras. When I speak about this new hobby to those around me, they all have the same things in mind: the top-of-the-range Leica, Canon or Minolta – digital cameras that would, admittedly, be very useful in my line of work. But they're all wrong. My interest lies in cameras that are simpler, but not necessarily 'worse' than those perceived to be the best.

The first two I've collected are from Russia: one from a manufacturer called Lomo, the other a 'top-down' camera manufactured by Voshod. There's also the twin-lens reflex Yashica camera my father gave me. Finally, there's a Chinese camera – the Holga – made entirely of plastic and very similar in appearance to a toy. These are far from being top of the line. Instead of APS or standard 35mm films, they tend to use more peculiar film types like Brownies or Polaroids. You'll likely have difficulty obtaining good results with them if you're used to modern digital equipment. They're anything but compact and you'll encounter problems getting the perfect focus, the camera relying entirely on the stability of your hand and not on some compensatory digital mechanism. To make matters worse, your photos will typically be either too dark or too bright. The chance of you spoiling a shot, in fact, is less a remote possibility than a near certainty. Oh, and did I mention that the viewfinders are so vaguely calibrated that the photograph's subject often ends up outside of the frame?

Yet with all this in mind, such cameras are still enjoyable to use. Seeing the old-fashioned nature of their output is like travelling back to the '50s. Sometimes, there's even enjoyment to be found in discovering some of the less intentional results. Unlike digital cameras, you can't just erase those pictures that went wrong – and there's nothing to warn you when they might go wrong. Perhaps it's because I'm getting old, but more and more I find myself drawn to these retro, analogue devices. They are, quite simply, fun.

Before long, another E3 will be over and I guess the mystery surrounding the next generation will have been dispelled. I already know a lot about the new machines, but I suspect I'll discover more features and applications during the conference.

Discovering the insane number of polygons that can be delivered, whether the platforms will support progressive scan, a hard drive or online – all these may seem impressive, but at the same time, so what? Frankly I'm a little bit fed up

It's an exciting time for a game developer, but one about which I still have reservations. Discovering the insane number of polygons that can be delivered, whether the platforms will support progressive scan, a hard drive or online – all these things may seem impressive, but at the same time, so what? Frankly I'm a little bit fed up, a bit tired.

Xbox turning into Xbox 360 and PS2 becoming PS3 fails to excite me nearly as much as when Super Famicom gave way to PlayStation. If there's one thing of which I'm certain, it's the tremendous



The mainstream industry races towards its goal of ultimate realism, but Bardo remains hesitant about taking the ride

The Holga's charm lies partly in its unpredictability. How does the nature of its output relate to what you expect in games?

Photos: thanks to John, [illegible]

pressure that awaits the teams developing tomorrow's games. They'll learn new technologies and tricks, suffer the increased development times and costs, and see people get fired because they don't fit with the new reality. This new generation may deliver hugely realistic graphics allowing creators to bring games ever closer to the movies, but digital will still be digital. Command A will trigger predetermined response B, rigidly scripted in advance. There'll be no place for chance or unexpected happenings; the only accidents will be bugs.

In such an environment, I feel Nintendo's DS will offer a vitally refreshing approach. Yes, most of its games are about just scratching the screen or directly pointing at an object. But at the same time you have a game like *Pac-Pix* which allows you to have your own very personal creation set in motion and controlled. This can, of course, be categorised as just another digital application, but the analogue application it represents is both interesting and impressive.

That this new mode of enjoyment is becoming more popular can only be attributed to a desire for analogue gaming, as opposed to the precisely designed digital realm. Of course there's a strong demand for games with incredible graphics, but more and more creators are delivering very original, even bizarre experiences. Accordingly, there are more and more users willing to indulge in them. I'd like to feel I'm part of this latest category of developers. Given the choice, I would choose the way of my toy-like Chinese camera, the results always being unpredictable. Which would you pick?

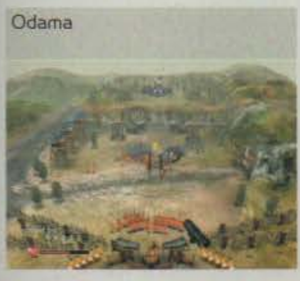
Namco's *Pac-Pix* is a heart-warming alternative to the rigid mechanics and scripted spectacle of the technological elite, indulging not the eyes and ears of gamers, but their desire to create and be surprised

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Odama



Gearing up for this year's E3 brings happy memories of one of last year's biggest suprises: *Odama* remains the most alluring feudal pinball game ever pitched.
GC, NINTENDO

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas



A mouse for eyes, a keyboard for feet and a USB adaptor for that all important DualShock steering: how we'll enjoy our sandbox mayhem when the PlayStation2 fog lifts.
PC, ROCKSTAR

Dreamfall



A chance to catch up with Zoe is a reminder of just how charming her world is. Even those who couldn't bear to finish *The Longest Journey* should be eager to visit.
PC/XBOX, FUNCOM

Massive multiplayers

How aiming for more may bring you less



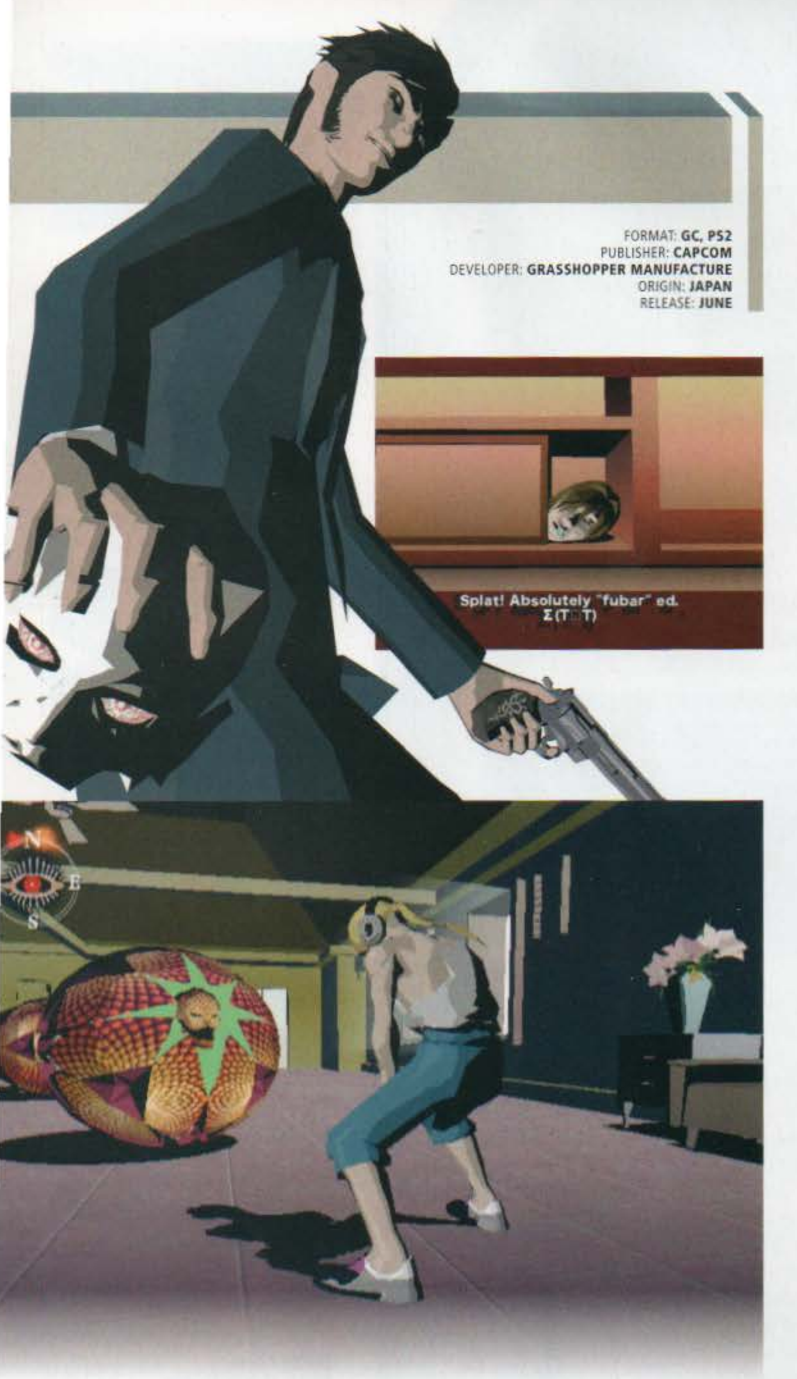
Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising gave its 150 players epic playfields, but also gave them scope and complexity to coordinate elaborate assaults

It's more of an inflationary spiral than an arms race: Novalogic, which pushed the PC's boundaries with *Joint Operations*' 150-player battles, is bringing *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* to console. Rebellion, working on the PS2 version, has been inspired by this to get 32-player maps running on Sony's more limited online service. Climax, working with the Xbox, can promise 50-player games. *Battlefield*, once the very definition of what PC gaming could offer over any other platform, is also on its way to your TV. And it's a trend which is set to continue. Persuasive rumours persist that *Perfect Dark Zero*, a likely 360 launch title, will support 64 players online.

But more isn't ever a guarantee of better. Putting dozens of players in a single deathmatch and shouting 'go!' is inevitably fun for a while, but many find it wears thin pretty quick, as chaos and camping take the skill and the structure out of the game: big numbers present big challenges all round for game designers. The first is to make sure enough people come: if you sell *Black Hawk Down* on the promise of 50-player maps, then you'd better be sure that when people go online they've got a good chance of finding 40 other people ready to get started. And at a time when *Halo 2* is sucking in the attention of almost every Xbox Live player, that's a stiffer challenge.

And then there's the question of giving those people enough to do. Big teams need big tasks – even the new *Halo 2* maps designed for a modest 16 players offer a scale and complexity that many corridor-and-alley shooters don't manage in their singleplayer games, let alone their online arenas.

Ultimately, though, there's the question of whether or not you're aiming for the right place to begin with. Despite Microsoft's utter certainty that online gaming is the only place to go, there's still no compelling evidence that anything other than a minority of gamers wants to play multiplayer games against remote opponents. Even fewer seem interested in playing against an army of them. Those that are are undoubtedly passionate and vocal about their support for these games, but developers might just be aiming titles that need the most players at one of the most limited demographics in gaming.



FORMAT: **GC, PS2**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **JUNE**

Killer 7

Multiple-personality disorder, domestic abuse, liberal self-mutilation, grenade-launching wrestlers: is this the most dysfunctional family ever?

So – elusive and enigmatic, or just long-delayed and messy? "I expect you've all cleared *Resident Evil 4*," jokes *Killer 7*'s producer **Hiroyuki Kobayashi** before beginning a lengthy and comprehensive presentation of Grasshopper's barmy circus-of-horrors adventure. Most shockingly, and despite the unfathomable nature of the shots and footage dripped out over the past year, *Killer 7* proves itself to be easy to grasp – part high-pressure shooting gallery, part survival horror-style exploration and puzzling. Not a world apart from *Resident Evil 4*, then.

Before we get to that, a little mood enlightening. *Killer 7*'s style is infamously individual, an uncompromising schlock nightmare of sharp cel-shaded edges and acidic colours. This distinctive direction means that even the most humdrum of urban and indoor environments are given a unique personality beyond their setting, something emphasised by an on-rails camera that's just as crazed as anything else in *Killer 7*'s repertoire.

The game's story is one that's equally easy to grasp, too, even if it is played out with a cast of disjointed characters who seem to share nothing but a drab surname and a capacity for murder. But there is something much more twisted that links them: none of them really exist. Harman Smith, the seemingly immobile leader of the troop, is the world's greatest assassin. His team of killers is an all-too-real and inexplicable manifestation of Harman's multiple-personality disorder which may or may not be explained as the game takes in six



connected stories, brought together under one anti-terrorist theme. With the world on the verge of peace and nuclear disarmament, the Heaven Smiles – an army of walking, invisible bombs – emerge to cause gruesome destruction, giving Harman and his team carte blanche to assassinate the assassins.

Each Smith has their own particular talent, one that's often obviously prompted by the gameworld, but they each bring their own style of gunplay to the frontline. KAEDE Smith – the willowy, ghostly girl of the group, clad in a slinky, bloodstained slip – carries a gun with a scope and can knock down certain barriers by slashing open a wrist and dissolving them with a bloody spray. Kevin Smith can turn invisible, essential for stalking past Smiles with weak spots on their backs, and wields an infinite stock of throwing knives. Thankfully, there seems to be plenty of room to use the Smith that best suits your preferred approach – the rapid-fire intensity of Con Smith's dual pistols, or MASK De Smith's smart-bomb-alike grenade launchers – throughout the game, with required roles being dictated mostly by environmental obstacles.

The Heaven Smiles, however, are terrorists in a far truer sense than just political



Despite being wheelchair-bound, Harman Smith still brings firepower to the fray – a rocket launcher clipped to the back of his seat. You'll see it in action at the end of the first story



You can switch between Smiths at any time, provided they're not bagged-up corpses elsewhere on the stage. Garcian Smith is only accessible when a Smith has died, but since his major role is that of cleaner and retriever, he's too weak to take into serious combat







Fallen enemies splatter into 'thick' blood, a power-up currency that can be used to recharge health on the spot or cashed in for upgrades in the TV room. All the typical categories can be improved – power, speed, health, etc – unlocking extra defensive and offensive specials as you strengthen them



A number of *Killer 7*'s beautiful cut-scenes are handled by respected UK production house Unit 9, and have a strong anime feel. Although, with *Killer 7*'s style being so fractured, vivid and abrupt, the cut-scenes could have been rendered in any manner or mood and still fitted in neatly with the game's overall appearance



Death and the maid

Whenever a Smith snuffs it, you're returned to the nearest TV room – which acts a check/savepoint – allowing you to assume the guise of Garcian Smith. Suitcase and weak pistol in hand, Garcian can retrieve the 'body' of the fallen Smith, located at their place of death in a squirming, bloodied lunch bag. Retrieved characters can be resurrected through intense button-bashing, or just left to rot until the start of the next mission. But if Garcian succumbs to the Heaven Smiles during his rescue mission, the game's over. The TV room is also home to Harman Smith's 'carer', Samantha. If you find her dressed as a maid, your game can be saved, and you'll find her in a polite, submissive mode. If she's dressed more casually, however, only a checkpoint can be activated, and it's likely that Harman is about to be on the receiving end of some abuse from her more psychotic personality.

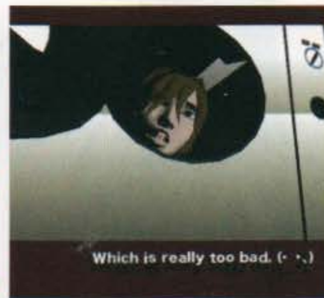
extremists. Appearing as barely visible blurs and given away by their sniggering, the player has to switch to firstperson-aiming view and scan the vicinity to reveal them. Every Smile has its own weak spot that'll provide an instant takedown, but can often be destroyed with enough shots to the rest of its body. Some require a more tactical approach, and the application of the skills of a particular Smith. And this is where *Killer 7* becomes a surprisingly strategic shooting gallery, with Smiles lumbering – or running, or rolling – towards the player, like a less twitchy but more threatening *House Of The Dead*. Smiles themselves are often terrifying; the bravely punned Ulmeyda Smiles, for example, bear caustic purple skin and teeth like torn fingernails and, like all other Smiles, will explode violently if allowed to get too close to the player. And when a Smile 'dies', it doesn't scream or howl with agony, it lets loose with a loud, gleeful cackle. This insulting death throe is an unsettling touch, but it could well become irritating as the game progresses. The soundbite spouted by each Smith upon a successful kill, too, is likely to irritate.

Confrontations with Smiles aren't always necessary. Plenty of them can simply be bypassed, or the player can often simply turn around and back off if a little space is needed. But, while *Killer 7* may be simple to understand, that doesn't mean it's in any way conventional – characters are moved through the game by holding down the A button, jogging along predetermined paths, with the B button turning them on the spot. When a junction is reached, the screen fragments into shards that point out possible paths for progress; pushing the stick in that direction moves there, so if the player knows where they're heading, it's a surprisingly smooth – if strange – configuration.

Its puzzles, however, do feel more conventional in structure, if not in appearance. Early obstacles require simple exploration, deduction and backtracking and it's this aspect of *Killer 7* that could turn out to be the weakest, however buoyed it is by visual imagination. So, while the biggest fear surrounding *Killer 7* can be dissolved – there *is* actually a game in there, and a tangible one at that, one that isn't just guff masquerading as highbrow fluff – it's replaced by a more generic one. But that structure is going to have to work very hard to break what appears to be one of the most startling and enjoyably peculiar gameworlds ever realised.

> The biggest fear surrounding Killer 7 can be dissolved – there is actually a game in there, and a tangible one at that, one that isn't just guff masquerading as highbrow fluff





Ghosts – the past victims of the Killer 7 – manifest in a variety of places across the stages, to give differing hints. The gimp on a string is a tutorial teacher, whereas a disembodied head turns up in obscure places – like inside a washing machine – to mumble puzzle clues, tailing each one with a curious emoticon

FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **DICE/EA**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN/UK**
RELEASE: **Q4 2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E146**

Battlefield 2: Modern Combat

The allied forces of Dice and an in-house EA team take the finely tuned master of sandbox warfare to a brave new arena



The radar provides an informative overview of the action while keeping it relatively straightforward. Travel towards a more distant location, however, is best coordinated via the comprehensive cutaway map



Good balance exists between gratifying destruction and conservative use of the two platforms' visual effects resources





Helicopters should be obvious weapons of choice, but the LAN tests in which we participated saw their popularity dwindle with time, largely thanks to their initially awkward handling

Battlefield 2: Modern Combat is not *Battlefield 2* ported to console, nor is it an expansion pack thereof, nor is it the sequel to any game that has previously appeared on either Xbox or PS2. On paper, it bears a close resemblance to its PC namesake – both games meeting at the same point along the series' progressing chronology of warfare. But developers **Marcus Nilsoon** and **Dan Blackstone** are insistent on the distancing of one project from the other, making the titular similarity nothing if not confusing.

Nilsoon represents the Swedish team at Dice that is working to faithfully bring the renowned *Battlefield* multiplayer experience to virgin territory. Blackstone, on the other hand, hails from an in-house unit at EA Chertsey, charged with the task of building a singleplayer experience that, in his words, "is better than *Halo 2*" – one that it's hoped will sell the overall package to a market where online multiplayer still lacks the support to survive alone. Between their respective teams, the mutual concern is ensuring that the best of two worlds make the final cut, neither wanting their considerable efforts in doing so to be understated as mere conversion. For the marketing folk at EA, this presents the unenviable task of selling two games keenly associated with a single brand, but not with each other.

Politics aside, however, the singleplayer footage that's been seen and the multiplayer code that's been played both indicate the degree to which *Modern Combat* has traversed the gulf between PC and console gaming. "We started doing *Battlefield: Modern Combat* at the same time as *Battlefield 2*," reveals Nilsoon, "but we realise that the PC market is the PC market and console is console, so everything is aimed straight at the console gamer. Everything that's too PC or doesn't actually work on a console just hasn't been put in." Accordingly, the heart of the *Battlefield* experience has been preserved while the peripheral luxuries afforded by high end hardware and a keyboard have not. On both of its new formats, *Modern Combat* multiplayer already boasts those distinctive sandbox credentials – myriad tactics, versatile equipment and instantly frenetic gameplay.

"All the cool moments that have, historically, been in the *Battlefield* games," declares Nilsoon, "like packing your Jeep with C4 and ramming it into the side of a tank, we want to encourage. We don't want to force the player to do it because the whole idea behind *Battlefield* is choice. In sandbox you've got really cool toys and you do what you want with them."

Choice, indeed, is what the game's alpha code auspiciously provides – the endless buzz of emergent scenarios that make each match greater than the last and made phenomena out of *Battlefield*s *1942* and *Vietnam*. Though the finished build will feature over ten contemporary environments ranging from canyons to arctic wastes, what's available at this juncture is a demonstration of two – a cold, dense city and a bridge crossing surrounded by a modest urban spread, each of which encourages an entirely different set of opposing strategies. Though there's nothing as ostentatious as an aircraft carrier to play with, both maps feature

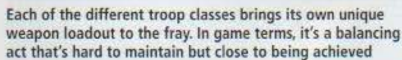












Each of the different troop classes brings its own unique weapon loadout to the fray. In game terms, it's a balancing act that's hard to maintain but close to being achieved



analogue sensitivity and ballistics have yet to be fully calibrated. We express disquiet at the proximity of spawn points and the ease with which players can be massacred at birth by a nefariously placed sniper, but Nilsoon has come armed with a retort: "There are always going to be people who exploit the game that way and we're spending much time looking into how we can avoid that. All those values [regarding spawn points] are server based so we can change them – we can change it so if someone's standing in the spawn area you spawn elsewhere."

opponents while an impressive sound mix (from the audio director of Band Of Brothers) has the ground shaking. The AI, however, seems muted – either trapped in emplacements or rooted to spawn points. This, apparently, is more thanks to the linear segment we're shown than to any general direction, the levels themselves described as singleplayer zones. "The idea of the AI," says Blackstone, "is to emulate what you get in multiplayer. Infantrymen will communicate with each other, point out threats to each other and respond to threats as a group."

Despite the paucity of evidence, we're quietly satisfied with this explanation. There'd be little sense in confining a game celebrated as the pioneer of sandbox multiplayer to a linear campaign. As to that claim regarding *Halo 2*, however... well, if they start at the end they'll already have one up on it.

War machines

Between them, Dice and EA have handled the downgrade to console extremely well. The Xbox version freely plays to the strengths of its platform, featuring a host of environmental effects that imbue the Kazakhstan landscapes with heightened ambience. Though visually inferior, the PS2 version more than holds its own. Besides a closer draw distance (that rears its head mostly during airborne manoeuvres) there's little in the reduced visual composition to ever suggest that the all-important *Battlefield* experience will suffer. Framerate on both formats is stable, though quite how the game will guard against the spectre of lag remains to be seen.

During a resoundingly stable LAN test, players are seen to parachute, camp, cooperate and kamikaze in satisfyingly equal measure, the infrastructure falling neatly into place

helicopters and a variety of land vehicles. Functionally, everything works as you'd hope it would – the desire to pile multiple troops into a single armoured dreadnaught being accommodated in every instance. During a resoundingly stable LAN test, players are seen to parachute, camp, cooperate and kamikaze in satisfyingly equal measure, the infrastructure falling neatly into place. Though we've seen nothing thus far of the very EA-centric '*Battlefield* Moments', such overblown statements of player greatness are, in a game like this, more than welcome.

What's also lacking, as you'd expect for a game that's months from completion, is refinement. Maps are easily exploitable while

Nilsoon continues by extolling the game's ranked servers, determined as they'll be by a routinely monitored set of points-per-hour statistics. The lobby system, we're told, has been rebuilt from the ground up, looking to the likes of *Halo 2* for inspiration while heeding the misfortunes of less successful efforts – "*Killzone*," says Nilsoon, "I couldn't even get online with. We're trying to look at everything that's great and improve it."

For that important singleplayer campaign, it's still early days. Since its inception in December, it's established much of its atmospheric hook – the enveloping chaos of war. Squad members exchange verbal feedback, seeking cover from entrenched AI





A vehicle laden with soldiers can, through coordinated effort, become a formidable killing machine. A tank driver with a decent aim, however, can happily turn it into a flaming multikill for the opposing team.



FORMAT: **PC, PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (SONIC TEAM)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **WINTER**



It seems possible that players may have to create a secondary character for online play, hopefully offering a range of races, styles and combat types to create a real sense of 'universe'







It's not yet known if *PSU's* combat will bring more varied complexity to the fights than the soothing – but hardly challenging – thwack thwack THWACK of the DC's *PSO*

Phantasy Star Universe

Five years on, Yuji Naka's ambitious online console RPG is still breaking new ground

The last time Yuji Naka spoke to us, he expressed a profound weariness for making online games. Talking about the frustrations of having to focus so much on preventing 'bad users' from ruining the game for others, he said he was 'sick of online' and that, until hardware manufacturers create a hack-proof system, he found it 'hard to be enthusiastic about online gaming'. And that makes *PSU* a very interesting proposition indeed.

There's no doubt that the PS2 isn't Naka's hoped-for hardware: even in Japan its online existence is still exploratory rather than established, and there's nothing specifically in place to protect players from the cheaters and 'NOL'ers which made *PSO* players (and Naka) miserable. So it's perhaps unsurprising to learn that *PSU's* emphasis – at this stage – is on the standalone, singleplayer game. Unlike *PSO*, it will feature named characters: two have so far been announced, Ethan Waber, a 17-year-old human, and Karen Ella, also 17, from a race called the Numan. They inhabit the Grail star system, whose warring factions (spread over three planets) formed a peaceful commonwealth 100 years ago. Ethan's story opens on the night of the centenary celebrations, which are brutally disrupted by mysterious aliens called The Seed. Their attacks ravage the Grail planets, and lead Ethan to join the Guardians, a force established for their defence.

The game's hub is the Guardians' Colony, an orbiting space station where players will each have their own rooms, which can be customised and used for recuperation while Ethan waits for his next assignment. From here, he can warp down to the surface of each planet and explore environments which seem substantially expanded from *PSO's* slender but stunning selection. Fighting follows the *PSO* pattern, with melee, ranged and magic attacks, and it seems that Ethan will often be fighting in a small team, alongside other, AI-controlled characters.

What's not evident is how this framework will adapt to support online play. While it's clear that *PSU* will be able to mirror *PSO's* system, with players meeting in the Colony hub and then warping down to the surface as a team, it's not quite clear what the game will do about the fact that everyone will have been playing the singleplayer game as Ethan, rather than as their own character. There's also no mention of coop offline play, despite this featuring in later incarnations of *PSO*.

Even as an offline game, *PSU's* potential is substantial. *PSO* proved the team can create unforgettably atmospheric worlds and a streamlined, if simplistic, take on the action RPG. And if Naka and his team have retained even a fragment of the enthusiasm and foresight which made the DC original such a success, *PSU* online could still be the PS2's defining online experience.



Boss encounters are likely to be epic, and may well benefit from the presence of your AI-controlled teammates, whose skills will no doubt complement yours

Hard times

What is known about *PSU's* online aspect is that it won't require the PS2's hard drive, as *Final Fantasy XI* did. After the functionality was unceremoniously dumped with the release of the slimline PS2, which is incompatible with the hard drive add-on, developers were forced to remove its capabilities from their plans. The decision received a hostile response from some Japanese developers, where the success of *FFXI* had meant that many felt they could start taking advantage of its potential. It's not clear if *PSU's* development was affected by the decision, but it might provide some explanation of why the online aspect of *PSU* remains a little hazy at this stage.



While nothing is yet known about other races, it seems that *PSU* will continue the series' trend for elegantly – although perhaps rather impractically – dressed warriors



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **VALVE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**

Half-Life 2: Aftermath

Rise and shine, Doctor Freeman. A new day in Half-Life 2 awaits...

Pity the FPS development community. While they attempt to match the majesty of *Half-Life 2*, Valve is working to surpass it. *Aftermath* is the developer's first attempt to create credible 'episodic content'. The expansion, available through Steam, aims to offer around eight hours of play, taking Freeman's story on from *Half-Life 2*'s slightly underwhelming ending.

This apparent space in the market meets Valve's own desire to explore the boundaries of its fiction. **Marc Laidlaw**, its in-house writer, is enthused by the possibilities: "One of the reasons we don't define the edges to our world is that we want to hold some stuff in reserve. We're laying track for ourselves." In that sense, *Aftermath* follows a very direct route. Playing as Freeman, you're re-inserted into City 17, moments after doing 'critical damage' to the citadel at the very climax of *HL2*. Alyx and Gordon are to lead the flight from its walls. "In some ways," continues Laidlaw, "the end of *Half-Life 2* mirrors the closing scenes of *Half-Life*. You've broken this great machine, and now you're going to have to deal with the result."


Gordon's companion Alyx will survive the end of *Half-Life 2*, becoming a more prominent feature in this episode

For those who felt the over-saturation of *HL2*'s media build-up undermined the experience, *Aftermath* should offer a more reticent alternative. All Laidlaw will reveal about the project is that Alyx will play a much more 'significant' role in proceedings. "It's kind of ironic that despite so much of the theme of *Half-Life 2* being about other characters and other people, you spent most of the game alone. We really want to grow Alyx as a character. There was the promise of that in the first game but we spent so much of our time introducing her, everything had to take place in a certain amount of time." And that, tantalisingly, is it – a prospect as likely to excite gamers as it is to demoralise Valve's competition.


Ant-Lions have broken into the city as the Combine weakens. Their fights with the city forces should prove fascinating

Minna Daisuki Katamari Damacy

A new chance to become the destroyer of worlds, as the cheeriest apocalypse in gaming rolls up for its encore

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **JULY 7 (JAPAN)**



Coop mode sets the challenge of both players pushing the same ball – although it's clear that the game offers a tutorial mode to help players adjust to the spatial peculiarities of using a beachball to go flower-collecting

Everybody loves *Katamari Damacy* to the extent that its sequel can get away with a title saying exactly that and be accepted with a smile. Namco may not have known that a project so small could build up a following so large, but it's certainly willing to put that momentum to the test.

While the core gameplay in *Minna Daisuki* remains unchanged, gentle tweaks have been made to both single- and multiplayer. The Prince's extended royal family is now available as playable characters in the main game, although as in the original's multiplayer it seems this is a purely aesthetic choice. On the subject of aesthetic choices, the wardrobe of unlockable apparel has been greatly expanded, with head-, face- and body-wear up for reward.

Level design is now more strongly themed, including the school setting shown in early shots – surely the fulfilment of a thousand idle classroom daydreams – and a racing circuit, in which the player must catch up with the pack before literally overtaking them. Perhaps recognising that the competitive multiplayer mode is slightly at odds with *Katamari*'s inclusiveness (though it's still reprised here), level objectives can now be complicated with a cooperative twoplayer mode. Each player is tasked with pushing one side of the ball, requiring both to work in tandem to keep their slightly-less-lonely star rolling smoothly.


The original's quasi-deathmatch multiplayer will be supplemented with more peaceful options, like this race through city streets to collect quiff-laden passers-by

With Namco's audio staff in rude health, as shown by *Ridge Racers* and *Tekken 5*, the as-yet-unannounced soundtrack should prove a delight. The question, then, is whether Namco loves everybody enough for a PAL version: the original's absence was rumoured to be a technical issue rather than a King Of All Cosmos-sized nose-cutting, and for many a European release would be the best addition imaginable.




The prince's wardrobe has been expanded considerably, woolly hats and comedy moustaches nearly disguising his unmistakable antenna

FORMAT: **PC, PS2**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **QUANTIC DREAM**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **Q4**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E132, E148**

Fahrenheit

An interactive movie? David Cage's new title sets its sights even higher



The game gives a choice of fixed camera angles, which can also be tilted and panned. It's best to trust Cage for the big moments, presented via dramatic angles



Game over can result from Kane being caught, or from any character falling prey to depression and madness. Completing tasks or grabbing a drink can boost your mood, but the best feeling you can hope for is neutral







Lights, camera, Cage

Fahrenheit **opens with a cameo from creator David Cage, walking you around his virtual movie set, explaining how to control the game and how you'll act as both star and director. It's more than a conceit, however, as the cinematic theme is used through the game in a way which has real impact on the gameplay. The screen often splits, showing you actions happening elsewhere, simultaneous to your own, or showing two perspectives on the same scene, drawing your attention to an object or guiding you to your destination.**

Fahrenheit is infuriating, but it's a typical reflection of its ambition that it's infuriating on levels most games don't even acknowledge exist. Although conceived as a movie that the player can direct, most will recognise *Fahrenheit* as an old-fashioned adventure game. It stars Lucas Kane, a young man who finds himself the puppet of a mysterious power, forced into the brutal murder of a total stranger against his will. The story follows his attempt to understand and escape this malign influence before the police lock him up as a simple psycho killer. If there's an amount of hokum involved in the plot – and an amount of tradition involved in the central mechanics of exploring environments, choosing your way through dialogue trees, and following QTE-style button prompts – there's very little in how the story is framed.

At its best, *Fahrenheit* has elegance and maturity that most games only dream of. In the course of the story you'll control Kane, the officers investigating his crime, and even the witnesses to the murder, sometimes during the same conversation. The game's utter refusal to reduce the situation to good



Fahrenheit's visual presentation ranges from the solid to the stunning. Animation can be clunky in enclosed spaces, but some, like these children playing in the snow, is breathtaking

versus bad, hunter versus hunted, gives the player the opportunity to explore fascinating middle grounds. Presented with the opportunity to control the main witness as she helps the police make a photofit of Kane, what do you do? Attempt to accurately recreate his face making it more likely that the police will capture him? Throw them off the scent? But the police aren't 'baddies', they're smart, careful investigators as keen to get to the truth as Kane is. And they hold parts of the puzzle he will need in time. So shouldn't you rather work to bring both sides of the equation together? The game gives you no cues, and its streamlined, well-controlled structure gives you the confidence to experiment and explore.

But these moments of brilliance are strung together with lumps of retrograde game design you'd hoped had been consigned to the dustbin. Interaction with the environment hinges on walking up to things and seeing if a context-sensitive option pops up. Try to answer a phone and you'll spend a few seconds wiggling into position, cursing every time the symbol flashes in and out of view before you've had time to activate it. There's rarely any penalty



Although Atari has insisted that all sexual content is removed from the game, characters are still physical and sensual. But interaction can still hinge on button bashing

for having to take your time, but it feels unforgivable clumsy. QTE sections – although a number use the analogue sticks to try to create a more organic movement more closely reflecting your actions onscreen – can also be frustrating. Four identical, mindless button-mashing marathons in a row just make your fingers hurt, no matter how sound the intention to help you more closely identify with the characters you control as you share the 'burn' caused by their pre-fight warm-up.

Fahrenheit still needs – and has time for – all its elements, both inventive and infuriating, to be smoothed over. The likelihood, however, is that it won't be able to iron out all its frustrations. But the simple fact remains that if games – as many players constantly demand – are to mature and evolve, they won't do so by playing it safe. *Fahrenheit* doesn't, and as such, is an enormously valuable project.





One of the changes Atari has introduced is to rework the game's UI. Analogue-stick prompts are now bolder, making it easy for you to follow the action onscreen while your thumb movements mirror Kane's







Some scenes from the dreamworld seem familiar, including *that* corridor of gently twisting ropes, but others are new: it's possible that the other characters enter their personal previous nightmares, not Kurosawa's







Zero 3's spirits, at least the brood shown so far, are united by their livid tattoos rather than horrific injury, although the blood- and bruise-coloured coils hardly look voluntary. The markings' gradual invasion of the soft-focus real world (left) is a new step for *Zero's* horror

Project Zero 3

Tecmo's other notable franchise continues its less salacious take on the theme of being Dead Or Alive

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **TECMO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SUMMER (JPN)**

Zero has been a surprise success for Tecmo, perhaps expected to enjoy a cult following like director Keisuke Kikuchi's other series, *Deception*, but instead finding strong popular appeal in both eastern and western markets – aided by its fortuitous timing to ride the new wave of Japanese horror that the Ring films led. Even with that jump-start it's a series deserving of its following, the game's contrast of slow-burning, rope-burning ritual horror and threateningly personal firstperson combat – daring you not to shift your soul-stealing camera's unblinking gaze until you see the black pits of their clawed-out eyes – having ensured its infamy and, now, its trilogy.

Following what seems to be an internal logic that each new game provides an additional cast member, *Zero 3* has a trio of playable characters, led by freelance photographer Rei Kurosawa. Already haunted by nightmares since her boyfriend's death in a car accident, she is further perturbed by his appearance in a photo taken on assignment in an abandoned mansion. With the snake tattoos of her dreams' inhabitants starting to work their way across her own skin, Kurosawa is spurred on to investigate the mansion with her lover's friend, Kei Amakura (it's unlikely to be a coincidence that he shares the family name of *Crimson Butterfly's* twins). The final ghosthunter is Miku Hinasaki, heroine of the original game and thus someone who really should know better.

In a departure from the long, hellish night of previous stories, *Zero 3* plays out in both the real world – during unsettlingly tranquil daylight, it seems – and the mansion of Kurosawa's nightmares. If only the dream environment is laced and bound in the bloodied restraints of the series' dread ceremonies, it seems neither world is safe from the influence of its ravaged, wrong-limbed spirits. The prospect of them flickering and lurching into well-lit, supposedly safe environments is an intriguing one, and a brave choice for a horror game to not be afraid of the light.

Silent Hill and *Siren* have shown that shifting realities and multiple viewpoints won't necessarily deaden *Zero 3's* ability to tell a gripping ghost story, but there's still a concern over how the gameplay will complement it. The original's unforgiving difficulty and the sequel's hugely relaxed one both drew attention away from their carefully plotted laments: hopefully, their experiments will have given *Zero* the time it needed to fully develop.



The Camera Obscura resurfaces, although it seems to have been given a slight upgrade in the form of a flash (above right). This has a brief repulsing effect on spirits, giving Kurosawa time to reposition for a switch to firstperson and line them up for the exorcising shot



Zeroed in

While the series' PAL releases have retained the original *Project Zero* title rather than switching to the American *Fatal Frame*, the significance was still lost in the lack of translation. The game's Japanese title is symbolised with a single kanji, 'Rei', which can signify 'spirit', or as it's more commonly taken, 'ghost' – and also, of course, 'zero'.

FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **PANDEMIC STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **AUSTRALIA**
RELEASE: **JUNE**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138**

Destroy All Humans

A chance for extraterrestrials to turn one of mankind's crowning achievements – GTA's template – against humanity



While Crypto's hypnosis power takes a few seconds to wrest control of a human's mind, once in place it can be used to put them to sleep, or cause them to act the fool in order to distract any others in the vicinity

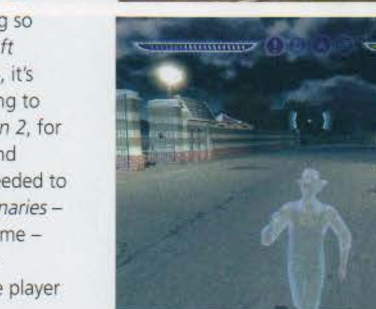
While a local radar is available to display any nearby humans or hostiles (top), *Destroy All Humans* is desperately lacking a map, something which can prove annoying in the wide-open suburban areas

With so many games borrowing so many bones from *Grand Theft Auto*'s free-roaming skeleton, it's inevitable that a few of them are going to get broken along the way. *Spider-Man 2*, for example, benefited from its new-found expanse, but neglected the variety needed to make it truly worthwhile. And *Mercenaries* – Pandemic's other sprawling action game – felt like it diluted thirdperson warfare perhaps too much in a bid to give the player the run of an entire warzone.

Destroy All Humans is looking to avoid this by chopping its world up into several themed stages scattered across America, in towns, farms and rural carnivals. Crypto – a psychotic Grey – is spearheading an alien invasion of this comic-book world, a take on the cheesy, tacky baby-boomer America that has felt the B-movie wrath of many an otherworldly creature. Since Crypto's presence in the game world isn't persistent, missions can be regimented and varied without feeling laboured. This is also useful since the human resistance forces – based on a typical sliding scale of opposition from local police through to the military – can be particularly aggressive, and scraps with them quickly become furious and deadly. Because Crypto can evacuate to the mothership at any time, these battles can be indulged in without fear of having to mop up or escape from the consequences. As a result, the game's opening hours are gratifying, but its ability to maintain this feeling will be vital for it to survive beyond a clump of hidden token, checkpoint race and rampage side quests.

Those first impressions, however, are excellent. Crypto's powers are handled well – psychic abilities on the left trigger, guns on the right – and the opening tutorial exposes a wickedly dark slapstick streak. Cows, the game's tutorial punchbags, are strung up and flung around like fat ragdolls. Human heads explode as Crypto takes a brutal approach to acquiring their DNA. The Zap-O-Matic gun electrocutes bodies before spinning them limply into the air and, later, people vapourise like straw dolls before the Incinerator Beam. Terrified citizens cower and wail when confronted with the Anal Probe launcher. Moreover, for mass destruction, Crypto can hop into his saucer – from fixed access points – and raze buildings with its death ray or use a tractor beam to turn a car into a makeshift wrecking ball. And, while environments generally feel deserted, there are plenty of props – from chickens to circus tents – to toy with.

Destroy All Humans holds together extremely well, but as *GTA* and its imitators have proved, it's worth little if it doesn't actually go anywhere. Forget the skies, and keeping watching the Review section in the coming months.



Most of Crypto's abilities will only function from a dangerously close range, but disguises can be activated from afar, stealing the identity of any human in sight



Scan artist

Crypto's most basic skill is that of scanning, of plucking thoughts from the heads of people as they dawdle past. Scans return to him in the form of a few lines of dialogue, some of which contain useful information, some of which are witty little riffs on the soulless existence of mid-20th century US suburbia, and too many of which begin to grate if you insist on invading the mind of every single passer-by. Scanning is, however, a useful way to top up your psychokinetic energy when disguised as a human, meaning that you're in little danger of breaking your cover provided that you can stomach the inevitable babble of soundbites that'll follow Crypto wherever he goes.



The game offers page after page of stats that chart Crypto's cruel achievements, but they also double up as overall mission goals. Despite the title, Crypto isn't required to destroy *all* humans, just a mere 1,000 of them



FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **NOVALOGIC**
DEVELOPER: **REBELLION/CLIMAX**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **JUNE 17 (PS2), MAY 20 (XBOX)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E115**

Delta Force: Black Hawk Down

Hitting consoles fast, hard and late, Novalogic's two-year-old campaign still has a little fire in its belly



This is liberation on a global scale for a very different set of oppressed people – online PS2 owners. *Black Hawk Down* may be an ageing PC title, but its console descendents draft a generous number of players for multiplayer – 32 for PS2, and 50 for Xbox, a technical prospect that belies the game's ageing appearance.

The singleplayer campaign appears to be a close relation to 2003's PC version but, on PS2 at least, Rebellion has implemented a conversion that plays well on the DualShock's sticks, perhaps a greater achievement than any breadth of online bustle. While the models and environments seem rough, there's enough scale to facilitate a game that's closer to the *Conflict* school of combat: fast, accurate, simple and as much *Serious Sam* as Uncle Sam. Enemies pop up in implausible numbers, leading to a frantic series of duck shoots as misrepresentative of real-world combat as *BHD*'s bombastic music.

Vulgarity aside, though, Climax has come good with its promise of 50-strong matches over Live. They're chaotic and cutthroat, with the window between confrontation and casualty being just milliseconds; when *BHD*'s maps are fully populated, tactics are flung into the background and best reserved for scraps between more modestly sized teams. In full flow, it's nasty and pulverising stuff, the kind where you'll rarely get to see your assassin. But with so many online gamers revelling in such vicious hostility, *BHD* shouldn't have any trouble filling up that generous quota of combatants.





The PS2 version features 25 multiplayer maps themed around the game's Somalian locales. There's no great diversity – a mix of alleys and open clearings – but securing and successfully exploiting a sniper spot is a gleeful rush





Despite the kill-heavy nature of the Xbox's online mode, there's still scope for strategic assaults and support. Snipers can snuggle into panoramic vantage points and small squads can assemble effective helicopter sorties



Shin Onimusha: Dawn Of Dreams

Capcom decides it's better the devil you don't know than the one you do, as its samurai series begins a new chapter

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (PRODUCTION STUDIO 2)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2006**



The core *Onimusha* series may have gone out with a Gallic time-travelling bang – and a slightly subdued reception, considering the lavishness of *Oni 3*'s production – but the name is returning with a new game, a new lead, and a new outlook from producer Keiji Inafune.

Dawn Of Dreams' first departure is its hero, sporting an original character design instead of a popular actor's likeness. The dual-blade-wielding lead is, uncommonly, blonde, and referred to as a 'blue devil', his horned headplate playing up this image – Capcom may have found his inspiration in Akira Kurosawa's unfilmed work Oni (itself licensed by Koei for a film and PS3 title tie-in, as the Japanese historical action genre becomes ever more incestuous).

Inafune's intention is for *DOD* to appeal to a wider audience than *Onimusha*'s waning traditional one, and to this end progression has been altered from the first trilogy's door-to-door travel to a more adaptive environment, requiring some lateral thought to clear obstacles and unlock areas. The storyline is also promised to be more extensive but less linear, and players will be able to divert from their destined path in order to explore or fight as they choose.



***DOD*'s luminous cherry blossoms and electric sword-trails emphasise its action focus, along with a tighter camera**

Whether the addition of a freely controllable camera will carry a combat overhaul as dramatic as the latest *Resident Evil*'s may not be apparent even at the game's proposed E3 showing: *DOD* is currently less than half complete. There's a year of development ahead for the dream to become a reality, though, and for Inafune to show he can reinvent a franchise as ably as he can establish one.





Starship Troopers

It's a bug-hunt infested with more onscreen enemies than the FPS has ever seen. Do you want to know more?

Starship Troopers, the RTS released in 2000 by Hasbro, wasn't so much a game that was begging to be made as an excuse concocted in its absence. Its amalgamation of both novel and movie references felt like a failed illusion, a suggestion of more in a package that was doomed to offer less. For all the icons that interfaced its moderate strategy with the player, it would never – could never – convey the one icon it required: a soldier with trembling rifle and a look that tells you it's laundry day, turning from a precarious gantry and screaming: "BUGS!"

Starship Troopers, the forthcoming FPS from UK developer Strangelite, is all about that image. Not the re-enactment of five years ago, with its irritable posse of creepy crawlies dancing an AI-afflicted conga across the terrain, but the real deal – a fierce arachnid ocean gnashing impulsively at the air, scrambling atop itself to relieve human torsos of their limbs. The desire is to provide the right ingredients this time rather than change the recipe. The results are an increasingly accurate portrayal that nonetheless raises questions about the experience it has to offer.

Previewing an early build, our attention is guided towards a number of recognisable set-pieces that are unquestionably riddled with bugs. Quickly dispensing with the inevitable *Driver 3* gag, this is an entirely intentional achievement and the 70+ creatures that gradually fill the horizon before coursing forth come courtesy of an impressive proprietary engine. Optimised for the simple, homogenous anatomies of insects, it's reportedly capable of handling over 100 onscreen enemies with AI governing three times that amount. Phil Tippett's inimitable creature design has been modelled to perfection, as have the eccentricities of Paul Verhoeven's direction, that creative signature representing a third of the task at hand that's already in the bag.

Of the remainder, half involves the AI that will govern both troops and bugs, along with those scripted sequences that'll cast the two in memorable encounters such as Hopper Canyon, the Klendathu Drop and Tango Urilla. Presently, bug aggression is largely limited to their great numbers, the individuals proving easy to circumnavigate and reluctant to give chase. We're reassured, however, that the endowment of refined AI will ultimately milk from them a worthy performance as they flank and pursue the mobile infantry, tossing humans between each other before piling in to feast on the pieces.

What remains beyond that is the nestling of those set pieces into a rewarding assortment of levels. It's already known that bridging those levels will be the same mini satires and fascist skits that enlivened the movie, but quite how much artistic licence will be used to pad out the action is yet unseen. Presently, the missions have an unpretentious objective system that channels the player from one ambush to another, performing relevant tasks at each waypoint. The weapons found throughout, from shotgun to familiar battle rifle, are all faithful, but will the imposed conventions of ammo conservation and acquisition eventually serve to harm the relentless flow of the subject matter? Based on what we've seen so far, we look forward to finding out.



Strangelite's bespoke engine is able to juggle an impressive range of bugs and objects, from the giant lava-spewing Tanker bug to its army of footsoldiers





It'll be interesting to see how the addition of AI routines transforms the formations of the bugs, as well as the tactics of the troops. In early code, bugs are seen to press forward as a wave before crashing into whatever is ahead



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EMPIRE INTERACTIVE**
DEVELOPER: **STRANGELITE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E141**



Campaign trail

Strangelite has at its disposal not just the IP of the first *Starship Troopers* feature, but of the entire franchise. Casper Van Dien is currently the only cast member to sign up to voice duties, which sadly means no "they sucked his brains out" recital from Michael Ironside and no torrents of saccharine melodrama from Denise Richards. Funnily, the publisher isn't in a hurry to play up the inclusion of the movie's execrable sequel, though the game will feature the laser fences it depicts. Roughnecks, the series' foray into animation, has also been mentioned, though the degree to which it'll be included has not. The preview demonstration does, in fact, suggest little of the peripheral events outside of the first movie: a reassuring indicator, perhaps, of the game's primary focus.



TITLE: **GENJI**
FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **GAME REPUBLIC**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**

ART AND FIGHTING

LEAVING BEHIND A DYNASTY OF HIS OWN AT CAPCOM, YOSHIKI OKAMOTO'S NEW STUDIO PRESENTS AN ACTION TITLE AS IMMEDIATELY ACCESSIBLE AS IT IS INTOXICATINGLY BEAUTIFUL

When producer **Yoshiki Okamoto** left Capcom, he took with him a history spanning generations of entertainment – *Forgotten Worlds* to *Street Fighter*, *Resident Evil* to *Devil May Cry*. His independent studio Game Republic's debut project for Sony looks back on an equally golden history for its source material: the deciding war between two great samurai clans.

"'The War of Genji and Heishi' is a historic fact, and it also produced a large number of heroic and magical stories. The theme of a handsome young man, Yoshitsune, and a devoted follower with incredible power, Benkei, is well known – it's similar to Arthur and Lancelot in western legend," says Okamoto, then adds wryly: "In addition to the highly recognised names, their legend is more famous than the historical fact, so that was perfect for an action game."

Genji's take on the conflict finds the overpowering Heishi clan waging war in search of Amahagane, 'celestial metal', which offers its wielders supernatural power: wresting one such stone from the grasp of





As the heroes skip between levels, the levels skip between seasons, an appealing graphical touch. Even indoor areas are moodily painted

young Genji samurai Yoshitsune is to prove the Heishi's stumbling block. If some observers were disappointed that Okamoto had apparently left a company making a string of samurai action titles to produce a samurai action title, *Genji* holds quiet revolutions beneath its showy armour.

"Big game makers have to create titles that they are sure will sell, as they have to consider stockholders and yearly sales," Okamoto reasons. "However, if you start your own company you can create new titles, and that's the biggest difference between Game Republic and Capcom. We can also be meticulous in many aspects so that the game content and system are new as well – but please, just play and feel it rather than listening to my explanation."

So we do, and while the graceful ferocity on offer feels every bit the confident work of an old swordhand: it's not a lazy similarity, but one borne of the controls reacting in exactly the way you want them to. *Genji's* combat operates on a standard light- and heavy-attack system, but is context-sensitive with regard to distance and enemy locations, producing learnably different results in different situations. Yoshitsune's flashiest swordsmanship comes from his Amahagane-powered Mind's Eye move, which drops the world into a ghostly haze and spurs his enemies on in underwater motion. Meeting sudden button prompts sees him twirl and strike through the charging throng, with a bonus awarded for unbroken sequence. Even bosses can be stopped with a Mind's Eye hit, but the risk of mistiming and taking their heaviest attack in return counterbalances the reward – and satisfaction – of success.

Not to be outdone, the mountainous Benkei has an extended moveset to make up for being resolutely earthbound, allowing charge-up strikes and whole new subset of attacks for either tree-trunk cudgels or wicked halberds. Intended to make him as viable a choice for full-time play as Yoshitsune rather than an unloved secondary character, its success will likely fall to players' abilities to grasp the larger contenders in 2D fighters, as those games' meaty sense of contact infuses *Genji*. Asked how his work as a 2D creator has affected his approach to 3D action, Okamoto modestly corrects us: "I feel kind of surprised to be called a 2D creator – technically speaking, I was only involved with the past 2D fighting games as a general producer, and after that I was involved with many 3D games. Each title has its own distinctive elements, so you can't just transpose another game's methods or techniques… but I think the most important thing I learned from the experience with 2D was a philosophy to entertain users."

"BIG GAME MAKERS HAVE TO CREATE TITLES THAT THEY ARE SURE WILL SELL. HOWEVER, IF YOU START YOUR OWN COMPANY YOU CAN CREATE NEW TITLES"

As PS2 visuals have had some of their greatest successes with monolithic scale, washed-out tones and hazy depth-of-field, it's startling to find that *Genji* draws the camera in close to intimate scenes of lushly overgrown seasonal colour. Revisiting locations as a growing world map threads them together finds them cast in a year's worth of shifting hues: sour rainstorms, inky twilight, golden sunsets. "We particularly focused on *Genji's* visual appearance: the motif is the period when Chinese culture entered into Japan, a beautiful, gorgeous period," says Okamoto. "It is called Miyabi in Japanese, and the way to express this Miyabi was through brightness. Many games are so dark they can conceal graphical shortcomings. Because our game is bright, we cannot hide anything, so we simply had to invest the time and effort." It's a hefty achievement for a latter-day PS2 title, and for a first-time team: "There are no staffers with experience since the PS2's beginning on the *Genji* team – in fact there were some young staff that had never developed *any* games before, so the early stages were very difficult!"

If coaxing a smooth transition from concept paintings to screen was a test of Game Republic's technical prowess, Okamoto had seen a greater challenge for his team in confronting the action genre's shrinking userbase. "The 3D action game genre already has an impressive history with many masterpiece titles. But it also has a downside that we



Yoshitsune and Benkei's first meeting at a river crossing isn't on cordial terms: the bridge is also the stage for a later face-off between Benkei and scores of attackers







can't ignore: the games are getting more and more difficult for beginners. Advanced players prefer complicated controls and exacting battles, but if we focus on their preferences only, beginners cannot enjoy the game," he explains. "The biggest challenge with *Genji* was finding the perfect feature-set and game tuning to enable beginners to finish the game and advanced players to play without getting bored. I think it's a challenge that we've met so far."

Dedicated players can finish off high-rank enemies and bosses with special attacks to win trophies, which can be taken to the local swordsmith and forged into powerful elemental weapons; unassuming corners of levels hold hidden depths – and items – for the careful explorer. Getting to them is another matter – Yoshitsune can leap up waterfalls and bound along rooftops, whereas Benkei can take a more shoulders-on approach of barging down barred doors and smashing obstructions, encouraging two-pronged backtracking.

Vestigial RPG and story elements aside (an original Japanese voice track with subtitles option is intended for the European release, SCEE having taken criticisms of *Siren*'s atmosphere-destroying dub to heart), *Genji* is a return to non-competitive arcade form, not punishing players who only came for the spectacle but still rewarding those who want to flex their technique. On that note, we wonder if Okamoto has any plans for the arcades, now he is no longer subject to Capcom's withdrawal from them. "If I come up with some good ideas, I would like to make arcade games again," he says, "but while the cost to develop arcade software itself is low, it requires a lot of money and effort to establish a system, and unfortunately Game Republic has no room for that for a while."

Fortunately, though, the fighting spirit obviously lives on in his growing studio – from 20 staffers and one title to currently over 100 staff and six titles in development – and *Genji* looks to be a firm declaration: here comes a new challenger.



Benkei's size advantage allows him to barge a platoon of enemies to their knees or swat them into the air with a single crushing sweep





PARADISE NOW

ITS MOST ADAPTIVE STUDIO PRESENTS A TRANSFORMED WORLD: WELCOME TO UBISOFT'S MUTATION OF FAR CRY

Founded back in 1997, Studio Montreal still rides the shockwave of the Tom Clancy explosion at a speed neither its environment nor interior decoration can withstand. It's an industrious hive that, in two years, has grown to accommodate a doubled workforce of 1,000 employees. One floor at a time, it steadily devours the building it shares with other unrelated firms, securing each new boundary with fearsome turnstiles and electronically secured doors.

Once inside, everything bar the design of the games themselves seems improvised, no single texture running consistently across more than a dozen surfaces. Concrete stairwells play host to the echoes of footsteps, dense arcs of shadow and the falling mist of cement dust. One end opens into vast expanses awash with sunlight, held aloft by iron uprights and pock-marked brick. At the other, a corridor juxtaposes wooden panel floors with an exposed lattice of wires and tubing. No one aesthetic prevails beyond the sense of organised chaos, yet there's a tangible suspicion that the telltale artistry of Ubisoft Montreal's games has, to a degree, been plucked straight from the interior of the studio itself.

Within this enclave, a team of 255 recently put their flexitime hours into the completion of *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory*. In their wake, discarded piles of office chairs and monitors now partition those who polish the fourth in the lucrative *Rainbow Six* series. "People do various things after projects," reveals communications director **Martin Carrier**. "Some go away for three months and we don't even know if they still work for us, then they come back and start something new." He breaks into laughter, but he clearly isn't joking.

The underlying philosophy is one that balances freedom of form with regimented purpose and function. Crunch times, suggest Carrier, are "not as long, not as huge" – the governing belief being that experience is a more valuable asset than burned-out staff with



Looking set to become one of the last AAA titles before Xbox 360 shakes things up, *Instincts* is a showroom of technical tricks and stylistically stronger than the original PC *Far Cry*





nothing left to give but their notice. Liberal as the allusions might be, however, the wall of microwave ovens, the cereal boxes and the wealth of in-house equipment (Hollywood-standard foley studio included) suggest a workplace dedicated to expediting the long hours of people devoted to their work.

Presently, for 80 of its staff, that work is *Far Cry: Instincts* – a courageous Xbox adaptation of Crytek's groundbreaking PC firstperson shooter. As a bridge between the realms of PC and console gaming, the Xbox makes for an interesting platform – the last thing it guarantees is an easy or straightforward port yet, with its related architecture, it presents an irresistible opportunity. Still a PC showcase title, *Far Cry* raises hoops through which a console

peaks and distant rivers. This grandiosity lay not at the end of an expedient device like a sniper scope, but everywhere the player chose to look with their virtual naked eye, rendered to the last leaf with unprecedented depth. To suggest that, for PC owners, it felt satisfyingly, exclusively high spec would be an understatement. "We can't have those textures with the Xbox," Gosselin concedes, "so we took the original engine and, for the first few months, we researched. We knew we had to keep a lot of things and that meant we had to adapt."

The fruits of the team's labours will surprise, both in terms of what they've kept and the degree to which things have changed. What began, designer and scriptwriter **Patrick Redding** describes, as a "balls-out, great-looking shooter" is becoming what design

something primal, potentially frenzied and increasingly uncontrollable. If there's a Hawaiian shirt to be found in *Instincts*, it's unlikely to last long before being ripped to tatters by its hero's mutating frame. Mechanically, this isn't far from where Tigon took *The Chronicles Of Riddick* – something of which Redding isn't in denial. "You're looking for the most iconic cultural reference you can create," he admits. "There was a lot of discussion about Riddick as a reluctant anti-hero, and how that ties in with

FAR CRY APPROACHED THE BOUNDARIES OF FPS ENVIRONMENTS WITH THE AIM OF REMOVING THEM

simply cannot jump. As a testament to Montreal's progress, however, there aren't as many as you might expect.

"The first month of production was about deciding what we wanted to keep, what made the brand on the PC," reveals producer **Roxanne Gosselin**. "There's the technical quality, the AI, the multiplayer." Of these, fans of the original game will immediately isolate the first as the most immediately troublesome. *Far Cry* approached the established boundaries of firstperson environments with the outlandish notion of removing them altogether – and the results were truly breathtaking.

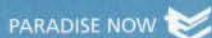
It depicted, for the first time, the wilderness beyond the blanketing fog and the imposing but often invisible walls of the FPS – rolling hills that languished beneath dense canopies, shores of brilliant sand and crystalline water, towering

colleague **Jean-Francois Dugas** sees as "a complete experience with in-depth stories and varied gameplay possibilities [but which remains] accessible at the same time." In short, this is a console game with console sensibilities, inheriting from the PC few of the features that would prove either impossible or unwise to implement. *Far Cry: Instincts* will be more cinematic, more diverse and, though said to retain the openness of its forebear via dynamic loading, will be a faster, more streamlined ride. "We wanted," says Redding, "to make sure our storyline adhered to that 12-20 hour window of opportunity and did a good job of driving the player forward."

From a narrative standpoint, that impetus stems from an early twist in which Jack Carver receives an injection that unlocks within him



TITLE: **FAR CRY: INSTINCTS**
FORMAT: **XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **STUDIO MONTREAL**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **Q3**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E140**



having these very visceral abilities. As Carver's injected and becomes more attuned to his surroundings, we start to play with his inner, instinctive monologue." This isn't just a battle of wits, then, between an intruder and his unknowing hosts – it's an intensifying drama in which the protagonist must battle with himself.

"Combining storytelling and game mechanics is an age-old problem and I don't think anybody has really figured out how to crack it," Redding continues. "I hear very significant differences of opinion, though equally respected, about how important storytelling is in a game situation. In so far as players like to have a consistent, logical metaphor upon which to base their experience, it matters." We're assured that, as contrived as the new story may sound, it's been successfully married to a suitably revised game: "The critical path of the story evolved in tandem with a better understanding of what the systems were going to be and a more rigorous understanding of what the level design was going to be. Those things need to happen simultaneously and that's becoming the in-house philosophy at Ubisoft."

He alludes to a range of new systems that each of its developers, at one point or other during conversation, tie to the theme of prey becoming predator. Inevitably, the names of a certain Schwarzenegger movie and a certain Stallone character are readily bandied about, coupled with detailed descriptions of how the player will learn to use the environment itself as an impromptu arsenal of traps. "It was natural," explains Dugas, "to give the main character some abilities that reflect both sides of the 'hunt'. Stealth manoeuvres will be perfectly suited to the first part of the game, while new feral abilities will start to emerge more in the second."

Of these abilities, we're told enough to assure us that the gameplay changes suggested are significant and very much appropriate to its new-found direction. From injection, Carver will benefit from heightened strength, recuperative faculties and new, Riddick-style sneak attacks. As the story unfolds, these base skills become increasingly elaborate, an adrenaline gauge metering their use. Feral Vision steps in to replace the 'CryVision' of the original, Feral Run and, interestingly, Feral Smell also becoming unlocked. Procedural AI means that, as well as manipulating scenery and testing the player with elaborate flanking manoeuvres, enemies may simply run for their lives when witness to decisive acts of aggression. Carver will later become capable of wrenching the heavy weapons from vehicles before using them himself, though with all of this primeval excess comes a warning – exploit it with reckless abandon and you effectively abandon your humanity to the beast within. Mechanically, the specifics of this remain unknown – surprises, it seems, Ubi is happy to keep close to its chest.

Will there be those, we ask, who resent these added dimensions to the Carver character? Perhaps there was something of the James Bond type in a man uncomplicated by the burden of superhuman powers. Moreover, will a denser narrative not restrict the emergent decision making that *Far Cry*'s sandbox world is famous for? "I don't think so," Dugas replies to the first point, "I think Jack Carver is way more integrated to the actual plot and gameplay than ever. The motto 'in wilderness, to survive you must evolve' suits perfectly well the experience



From left: Christophe Bedand (art director), Shawn LeBlanc (map editor lead), Alexandre Mandryra (multiplayer designer), Sebastien Bessette (multiplayer lead), Roxanne Gosselin (producer), Jean-Francois Dugas (lead designer), Benoit Richer (lead level designer), Patrick Redding (designer/writer)



The question of how *Instincts* would adapt the PC game's wavering sniper scope has been answered with the employment of an adapted breath-control technique. Currently, players can take a breath before pulling the trigger, steadying the camera and allowing for that vital headshot

IT AIN'T NO MAN



One of the many interesting propositions of *Instincts* is a multiplayer mode provisionally entitled Predator. If they change the name, it'll be because they want its filmic inspiration worn a little less prominently on its sleeve. Truthfully, though, it's as much a derivation of the *Quake III* mod Hulk as it is a nod to sexual tyrannosaurus Jesse Ventura. A team of players must successfully track and eliminate a single player – an 'evolved' leviathan that must kill to survive, and kill everyone to win. This, Mandryra claims, will bring "emotional intensity" to the convention of multiplayer. In his words: "You're in the jungle, with its surrounding sounds. But when you start shooting, there's a silence and you finally hear something running away, maybe hitting some water. You try and locate it, then the buzz from the jungle comes back and it's: 'Oh my god, I lost him – where is he?' Then you hear screaming through the voice communicator."

CIRCLES IN THE SAND



The console FPS has traditionally offered little in the way of user customisation beyond the tailoring of skins and the adjustment of rules. Like *TimeSplitters*, however, *Far Cry: Instincts* will bless idle thumbs with the opportunity to create entirely new multiplayer maps that, as in Free Radical's game, can be shared and played online. "While the editor won't have all the little tables and chairs that are available in the singleplayer game," says designer Shaun LeBlanc, "what we will provide is enough objects to define the gameplay, the flow. Players can build their own maps that play just as well as the professional ones – not as pretty, perhaps, but they play just as well." With an efficient snapping system, realtime preview option and an extensive library of objects, it's a feature that doesn't deserve to be overlooked.

we want to offer." Regarding the latter concern, Redding is philosophical: "We don't have the luxury of being 100 per cent exploratory when doing an Xbox game – it's just not possible. So we needed to find ways to preserve the multi-path spirit of the game while still finding choke points to help structure and confine the player."

It's a progressively convincing argument, made all the more reassuring by the consistency with which the theme of evolution is introduced in character, narrative, action and, as Redding reveals, environment.

"We looked at movies like Apocalypse Now and at the themes of how thin the veneer of humanity is. The game, we decided, should feel more infernal and apocalyptic as it goes along. Something **Christian Bédand** [the project's art director] focused on was the idea that you start out in paradise, so the game should resolve itself in a nightmare."

Bédand, it emerges, is very much an artiste – a visionary with a steadfast eye and unshakable ideals who, having worked on the original *Splinter Cell*, boasts an authoritative visual CV. "Contrast," he states, "is what I like more than anything. When something's light, I want it to be light; when it's dark, I want it dark. We decided to give a different experience with *Far Cry*, one with a lot of different ambiences such as when you're in the mines and it's very dark, then you escape and you're in the clear – the complete opposite." It's through Bédand that Ubi is pulling perhaps its most impressive coup – a conversion that jovially confesses, via Redding, to using "a lot of smoke and mirrors," yet artistically aims to better Crytek's original.

One example, which is already omnipresent in the game's alpha code, is overbright. Unlike Crytek's experimental HDR (High Dynamic Range) PC patch that often washed out night scenes by mistake – and went haywire when confronted with an interior – the sun flares, heat haze and shadows of the Xbox game are fundamentally integrated into Bédand's visual strategy. "Just having dynamic shadows everywhere," he remarks, "is amazing. In meetings, I thought they were going to laugh at

"WE LOOKED AT MOVIES LIKE APOCALYPSE NOW AND AT THE THEMES OF HOW THIN THE VENEER OF HUMANITY IS"

me when I suggested it, but now we have it and it looks good. Sometimes we just have to push something – identify the main thing we need and work to make it better, to have it." Though it's still striving to secure an overall update of 30 frames per second, the game does look marvellous with vastly improved undersea effects and the early signs of eye adaptation blooms to accentuate that clash of light and dark.

"It's a matter of composition," Bédand asserts, "and I think in movies they have control over every single angle, which is something we don't have in a game. So what we're doing now is taking grabs every five metres and seeing how we can improve that image to be screenshot potential." Faced with a task dismissed by many as technical suicide, his staunch perfectionism warrants applause. "It's also in the little details," he adds, "that can become almost subconscious. Like we know he's going to go into the forest, so why don't we put a red or yellow flower there to make up a real picture?"

Before long, the pitch – that of a more rounded package that addresses one technical constraint with an equal and opposite creative push – is sounding both achievable and enticing. *Far Cry's* familiar world – memorable assets preserved – is being imbued with themes that, though never strictly missing, were never fully appreciable on the PC. "All of our architecture, whether it be WWII stuff or something Krieger has built," Redding states, "has this sense that there's a war going on between nature and the artificial. All of our artificial settings are in some state of decay – all on the verge of breaking

The silenced pistol is one of many new additions to the game's arsenal. Considering the original game's cacophanous weapons, it should make stealth a more feasible tactic

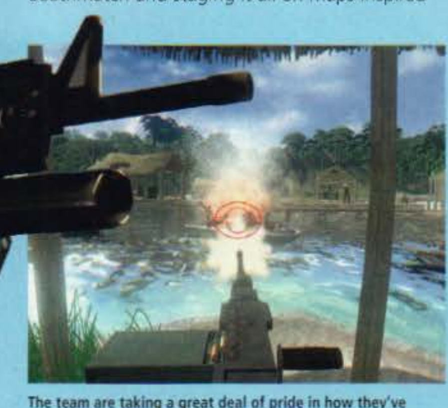


Workers throughout Studio Montreal are clearly used to the barely contained disarray that's prevalent throughout. Such is the price of financial success and almost continual expansion

down." This sense of character, it's furthered, will help to enliven the original game's much-maligned interiors.

"It's an absolutely fair point," says Redding, "to say that you buy the game to enjoy beautiful lush settings and crazy outdoor levels and, all of a sudden, you're walking down corridors and the same old environment." The solution, then, is a compensatory booster shot of character, elicited by evocative design together with layers of normal and specular mapping. "What makes the game feel alive," proclaims Bédand, "is when something is not new. When something is not clean there's a life – somebody took it, did something with it and now it's broken, dirty or used. The same is true of environments."

It seems that, in this team's hands, the challenge of translating *Far Cry* has become a playground for idealistic expertise – the subject of varied individual quests to push the FPS, the Xbox and, while they're at it, produce a worthy adaptation. Accordingly, its multiplayer component, for designer **Alexandre Mandryra**, provides a welcome opportunity to put back into gaming five years of experience as an *Unreal Tournament* coach and a card-carrying member of the FPS hardcore: "What we're trying to do with *Far Cry: Instincts* – with map sharing, map editing and dedicated servers – is one of the coolest things: trying to focus on what makes the PC community happen and what makes it alive." Together with colleague Sebastien Bessette, Mandryra is keen to refine the dynamics of Capture The Flag and Assault, satisfying en route the casual demand for deathmatch and staging it all on maps inspired



The team are taking a great deal of pride in how they've brought the shimmering waters of the PC game to a lesser piece of hardware. Not only does the surface look pretty, but underwater sequences are substantially more effective thanks to a novel use of blurring that adds weight to the illusion



First Blood-style traps will help to deepen strategy while giving the procedural AI something to think about. Ideally, of course, your hapless targets won't realise until it's too late

by the 'feeling' of *Quake III*. There are land and sea vehicles, weapons that already feel balanced and maps that suggest the evident touch of a devoted online clansman.

In multiplayer, the project is again building a bridge – inevitably to its PC origin, but also to the emerging future of console multiplayer and the associated ambitions of Xbox Live. With a fully featured map editor and dedicated server support, *Instincts* seeks to foster a console community where creativity and drama (see 'It ain't no man') are shared alongside competition. "When you give players the tools to actually produce content themselves," suggests Mandryra, "either by making their own maps, designing their own rules, recording their own footage or controlling their own server, you make it a truly interactive medium. Interactive doesn't just mean that, when you press A, something happens onscreen – it means that you receive a very creative item as a game."

If *Instincts* makes one thing clear, it's that creativity is not to be understated – it's a virtue by which Ubisoft has sunk its teeth far into a seemingly untouchable licence, drawing from its heart a river of fresh blood.


NY
PERIMETER



WHO THE HELL DOES MARC ECKO THINK HE IS?

In February, at the DICE Summit in Las Vegas, he famously told the videogame industry what it was doing wrong, that it didn't know what its customers wanted. This from a clothing brand bigwig who's never been involved in the production of a game in his life. Until now...

Marc Ecko gets angry only once during the interview. Well, exasperated is perhaps more accurate. It's when the inevitable comparison with *Jet Set Radio* comes up. "It's the same game," he says with heavy irony. "We wanted to do *Jet Set 3* and since they let go of the franchise we picked it up where it left off." He turns to Atari's PR representative. "Is that OK to bring to press?"

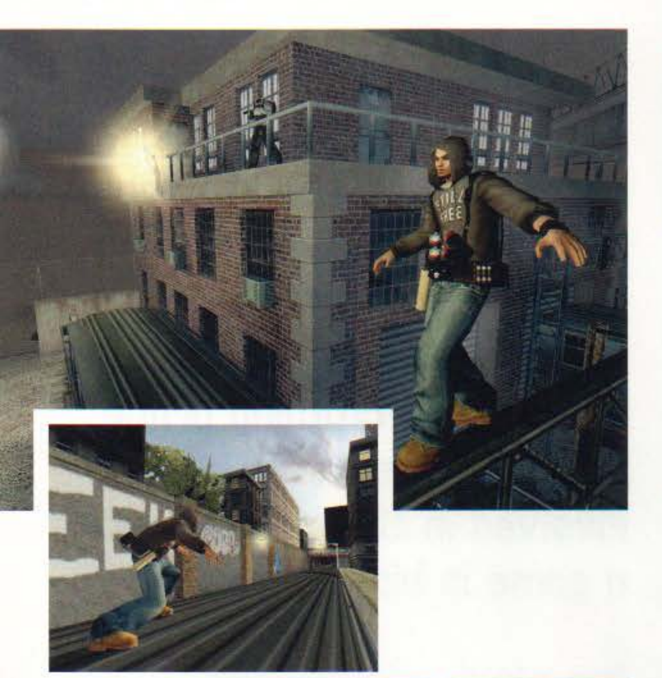
The two games are very different animals, he goes on to explain: "There's no rollerblading, the graffiti mechanic is very different. It's important that we give you a really cool, immersive experience as it relates to graffiti culture. I want you to experience graffiti from simple stickers, to an aerosol, to writing with glass etching cream and putting it on glass, right up to doing huge roll-ups."

Yes, both are about territorial conquest through artistic expression, but *Getting Up* intends to get closer to what it's actually like to dangle 40 metres below a bridge and spraypaint a tag across a huge expanse of concrete. You may have wondered how someone managed to get graffiti on the top of a tower block in the middle of the night. This game aims to answer that question.

Ecko also hopes that *Getting Up* will do something even grander: give players a heightened sense of their own urban environment, and ultimately, to give graffiti the recognition it deserves. "There hasn't been an artistic medium – maybe besides Dada – that has had such a global explosion. Despite what language you speak or what part of the world you're from, graffiti and the graphic aesthetic of graffiti is a global language of youth culture and rebellion – it informs everything that young people consume. Yet there hasn't been a

TITLE: **MARC ECKO'S GETTING UP: CONTENTS UNDER PRESSURE**
FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **THE COLLECTIVE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**







Although the soundtrack for the game hasn't been revealed, you can expect some well-known hip-hop acts to deliver tunes to accompany your graffiti adventures. Hip-hop artist Talib Kweli is already providing the voice for the main character, Trane

medium other than graffiti that hasn't been taught. There's no proper institution to teach it. There are no art galleries chasing to showcase it."

Ecko speaks with passion, liberally throwing in expletives to his monologues while fending off phone calls and requests during the interview. His name hasn't been added to this game by Atari as a token nod to pop culture – it's his project and one that he harangued Bruno Bonnell to publish. Impressive when you consider that Ecko was $6.5m in debt when *Getting Up* was first proposed. But business is rude again, and so is Ecko.

"Videogames, despite being the coolest fucking things in the world, have a really bad self image," he continues. "To me, from a pop culture medium, they're always three years late to the party – compared to music, film, television. There may be people out there reading that, thinking, 'What an arrogant piece of shit', but if you take an inventory about what moves the needle in pop culture, gaming is always late to the party. It's kinda like the prom has come, you went to the prom and now mom is letting you drive without any supervision. Gaming needs to realise that we're grown up, we're older, and it's time to go exploring new things."

The way *Getting* *Up*'s development chain is set up is unique. Ecko is the game's executive creative director; he spends approximately half his time managing the creative content of the game, liaising with The Collective and Atari, ensuring that it all concords with his vision. He talks about core competencies and how developers rarely get the opportunity to focus on what they're good at. To make it 'culturally precise', Ecko is employing specialists in other fields to hone everything from the camera work to the graphic art. Graffiti legends Futura, Cope 2, Scene, T-Kid, Smith and Shepherd Fairy are not just allowing their work to be used in the game; they are *in* the game.

But isn't this just the *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* route to success? An easy way to give your game cultural relevance? Ecko shakes his head. "I'm an outsider," he says ruefully. "I'm a fan but I'm not a graffiti artist – I was the kid reading Henry Chalfant's Subway Art. These cats are the real deal. The whole core of my aesthetic, as a designer, is that I've been informed by graffiti. I think people entrusted that I'd do the right thing, but no one was bending over backwards. A lot of these guys didn't even want to show their face. It was more trust. For this game to be made it needed a guy like me in the mix that respectfully paid homage to the culture. The white noise in the world that you dismiss as filth – graffiti – is something that you won't dismiss any more."

The 'getting up' of the title informs everything the game stands for. You play rebellious street artist Trane, a kid looking to get street cred and take on the oppressive authorities that control the semi-fictional world of New Radius. Each level presents a discrete location in the city and while early levels get you used to the controls, combat and platforming devices, later levels ask you to climb up high. Really high. One of Ecko's producers refers to it as "an urban *Prince Of Persia*." It seems like a silly tag at first, but when you see Trane tiptoeing across scaffolding and leaping on to advertising hoardings the inspiration is obvious. Already the game has a wonderful verticality and induces the same queasy vertigo that made Ubisoft's title so thrilling.

Trane is suitably agile and can navigate the environment via ladders, pipes, poles, ledges, scaffold and crown mouldings, while a clever look-back camera ensures there are minimal leaps of faith. It's all built around analogue control, of course, and there's a degree of risk involved when judging distances, but hopefully the spatial relationships between ledges and objects will remain consistent.

On present evidence there's also much game balancing to be done. At its heart *Getting Up* is a platform game but it also has stealth, close combat and a wall spraying mechanic mixed in. There are also some ludicrous traffic-avoiding sections that make Eddie Murphy's freeway sprints in Bowfinger look easy. Although Trane has an energy bar, presently there's no way of knowing if falling from a high ledge or getting run over by an articulated truck

ECKO AND THE BRANDING MEN

Marc Ecko began his creative journey as a graffiti artist in New York while still at school, though he modestly dismisses any notion that he was ever 'the real deal'. His creative impulses soon took him into the world of fashion where he began designing hand-made T-shirts eventually leading to the establishment of Ecko Unltd in 1992. When Spike Lee and Chuck D were seen sporting his apparel the brand began to get an underground reputation but then a fashion spot on Good Morning America suddenly gave Ecko national recognition. Now Ecko Unltd has expanded to include well-known brands such as Zoo York (a line of skateboards and skate-influenced clothing and accessories), Femme Arsenal (an upscale line of women's clothing, accessories and cosmetics), and Complex (a new men's culture and fashion magazine). Perhaps Ecko's most visible logo, however, is Rhino Unltd, a brand that he says encapsulates the company philosophy: tough and uncompromising (also, the rhino is the only mammal that cannot move backwards, only forwards). Although Ecko's brands will be advertised in the game he is keen not to go overboard. So don't expect an unlockable clothing range and baseball cap collection.

TRANE

is going to feel fair or frustrating. But from what we've seen, traffic-based areas only play a minor part in the adventure. Mostly, they'll appear as fast-moving dots from your high vantagepoint.

The stealth, too, has yet to be fine-tuned. Perhaps aware that it's done so badly elsewhere, Ecko decided to give it another name: sneak. "In traditional stealth gameplay the AI of your enemy has an orderly path and he's armed, and you are some trained operative that can wall-hug and can hide in alcoves and boxes," he explains. "Yes, this creates tension, but it doesn't create the same kind of anxiety as when you're sneaking. Rival gangs are not armed. They have what we call social patrols. Then we have urban alarms – like a window might open and an old lady will alert a secondary alarm. There's a different kind of anxiety. The cause and effect of learning an alarm in sneak is almost as gratifying as the rest of the gameplay. We don't give you the option of ducking out and waiting. There is a fundamental difference in how the AI is set up. Graffiti artists use one patrol, pedestrians another, and police another."

We try to pin him down on how sneak works in practical terms, but the concept remains woolly. It appears that the conventional visual language of stealth – security cameras, cones of vision, radars – will not be used, or at least not be obvious. And when your presence is noted by rival gangs or police, there's no hiding in alcoves or boxes, you have to deal with the threat head on or climb your way out of trouble. If it works, it should shake things up.

When it comes to explaining the cultural relevancy of *Getting Up*, Ecko is more sure-footed, batting aside the notion that his game fits into any neat pigeonhole. "I see games as not quite reflecting popular culture," he laughs. "You know, I don't limit my crit of the gaming space to what's 'urban' or not. In the current cycle the press is trying to editorialise this boom in the genre of urban. As an industry it's very me-too, it's very iterative and derivative of itself. But newsflash. When you see what moves the ticker for the publishers – the IPs that move the ticker for these publishers are massmarket concepts, like sports. But these guys are not spending 30 hours a week playing MMOs. It's only mainstream concepts that drive the market."

Ecko is clearly miffed about the possibility of his game becoming so easily labelled. It's bigger than that, he claims. He doesn't say it outright, but he feels he's in a unique position to deliver an experience that connects with people, especially those who wouldn't ordinarily play games. "Does



New Radius draws heavily from the sights, sounds and architecture of both New York and Tokyo. The highest point of the city, and the final destination, is not the top of a skyscraper, but a giant blimp



"San Andreas was urban, but you could have done a country-and-western *GTA* and it would've sold"



New Radius is governed by a corrupt mayor who employs Civil Conduct Keepers to thwart your night-time escapades. With 11 distinct environments and 20 levels, the game is only complete when you collect every bit of art from over 50 graffiti legends

San Andreas count?" he continues pell-mell. "*San Andreas* was urban, but it was also *Grand Theft Auto*, motherfucker, you know. You could have done a country-and-western *GTA* and it would've sold."

So what's the special ingredient? How do you get it right? "*Grand Theft Auto* wasn't people only reading this magazine or reading a blog online and driving X amount of units. It was wider than that. It was a cultural phenomenon – like a blockbuster, one that's mainstream. Well, on this product we've focused on being as culturally precise as possible. But at the same time this is not a simulator. We are not creating a graffiti simulator. There's a story. It blends sci-fi with an urban tale. Our product is very unique because it takes the best practice of traditional gameplay, of storytelling convention, and blends it with something that's modern and stylish. How are we getting it right? I don't know. We're really standing naked in front of the mirror and deciding what we've got good going on and what we haven't."

Getting Up's appeal is instant. Unlike *Prince Of Persia* the motivation for reaching New Radius' highest rafters is not just to get to the next level, but to leave your mark, gain respect and, ultimately, show defiance to the police state. Tagging areas is also an enormous part of the experience and as your





Photography: **Justin Borucki**

Mark Ecko contemplates crossing over to the mainstream via *Getting Up* from his suitably graffiti-bedecked New York HQ



reputation increases so do the methods with which you can graffiti your environment. Aerosol, rollers, markers, wheat paste, stickers and stencils all become part of your artistic arsenal. The shoulder button locks Trane to the section of wall that you're tagging and the left analogue stick moves the hero's arm. Small tags can be done in a few seconds; larger murals might take several minutes.

All the art has been designed by authentic graffiti artists and it's important to Ecko that the game retains 'integrity' throughout. Maybe this is an excuse for not allowing customised, player-created tags, but with thousands of predesigned graffiti logos and murals in place it's difficult to see anyone becoming tired of the artwork available. And if you are a graffiti aficionado then you will recognise the work of famous graf artists, some of it going back to the 1980s.

Indeed, one of *Getting Up*'s more attractive features is the opportunity to copy the work of over 50 graffiti legends into your black book. Pressing one of the shoulder buttons triggers an intuition vision that highlights areas where tags can be laid down but also foregrounds mission-specific and





The highest and most precarious tag locations are referred to as 'heaven spots'. As in the real world, if you make one false move while applying your paint it's a long fall followed by game over. Meanwhile, genuine graffiti artists (below) put in appearances throughout: look for their tags



non-mission-specific goals along with the location of legend tags. The latter, as you might expect, can be in very difficult-to-reach locations.

As Trane's skills increase and his reputation grows, more complex graffiti styles become available. Rep labels go from Toy through to Legend and right up to All City King as the graffiti style and the state of graffiti in New Radius evolve over the course of the game. In terms of the plot, details are scant but it's clear that there are some loose narrative strands based on historical fact. One such plot line involves the 'Take Back The City' campaign which saw graffiti artists battling with New York authorities to keep their work displayed on trains.

Anyone familiar with the work of *Getting Up* developer The Collective will know that many of its games contain a robust rough'n'tumble kind of close-quarters combat, or what Ecko calls "real kick-in-the-balls" fighting. *Getting Up*'s combat is closer to *Indiana Jones And The Emperor's Tomb* than *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, and there are even rottweilers to contend with. Fighting with other gang members (none of which is armed) looks to be suitably engaging, though it's a concern that the tougher goons carry firearms, and you can't dodge or defend yourself against bullets.

Getting Up may do that rare thing and truly cross over into the mainstream, but from a pure gaming perspective it's its verticality that appeals. At first glance it's a platform game with that same dizzying sense of scale that the original *Tomb Raider* gifted to 3D gameworlds, but there's also an Escher-like architectural beauty here. The intuition feature works like a blazing red trail that quickly leaves fading stains over the landscape, the primary places for graffiti art. Some are within touching distance, others seem impossibly out of reach. It's here where Ecko's project is likely to succeed or fail – in how gratifying it is to actually get up and advertise your rebellion to the world of New Radius.

As for getting down with the kidz, Ecko is deadly serious: "Games need to cross that bridge from games to entertainment products that are culturally rich and reflective of pop culture. It's easy for MTV or Coke to use it [graffiti] as a device to get your attention. I'm appealing to *you*, young person." Only the charts will prove if he's got what it takes to give them what they really want.

TRANE

"Games need to cross that bridge from games to products that are culturally rich and reflective of pop culture"



TITLE: **HELLGATE: LONDON**
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO**
DEVELOPER: **FLAGSHIP**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2006**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E149**



LONDON CRAWLING

The now-independent originators of Diablo are raising hell again from a new perspective and in a new world: ours

Couched in the retro-chic red curls of the foyer at Namco Hometek's Santa Clara headquarters, **Bill Roper** is challenging allcomers on a widescreen-projected *Tekken 5*. It could be a strange sight to PC gamers more familiar with his history as a producer for Blizzard: we imagine the same gamers making a collective, cosmic double-take when he later references *Animal Crossing* during the presentation of his post-Blizzard studio Flagship's debut project.

We've come to California to see Flagship's take on London, a title so anticipated that it was drawing attention even before it existed – nearly from the day in June 2003 when Roper, and the founders of *Diablo* developer Blizzard North, left the studio they had built. Such was the speed of their departure that it was all Roper could do to slip his mobile phone number into an interview with GameSpot, ensuring that during Flagship's formative week "the phone was ringing constantly, alternately publishers and fanboys," Roper laughs. "In a good way, it rang constantly."

Namco's American division has big plans for the PC gaming market (see 'Hometek work'), and Flagship's game is its flagship game, referred to in almost reverential tones before we return to San Francisco to see it properly. *Hellgate: London* draws on the themes that saw *Diablo* achieve such success – but where once Hell clawed its way out into a medieval hamlet, *Hellgate* finds it claiming near-future London. The survivors of the initial invasion, and the following doomed defences, have taken refuge in the Freemason-constructed Underground lines, building a resistance as directed by the Knights Templar while the occupied city warps around them.



HOMETEK WORK

Namco Hometek's renewed vigour, upsized offices and PC publishing push is further indication of its Japanese parent's growing interest in the western market – and also of PC unit director Grantley Day's self-confessed 'hardcore PC gamer' enthusiasm, Day himself a charismatic but fleeting presence as he departs for an early-morning flight to Japan and Namco HQ. Day and senior producer Chris Wren (whose resume strides target markets from flight simulators at Microprose to life simulators at Maxis) are overseeing Namco's entry into the desktop arena is not a cautious toe-dip but a running dive, with the original titles and heavy-duty licenses to prove it. Hometek's acquisition of the Warhammer and Mage Knight tabletop fantasy licences addresses the latter, with the first titles in both (a strategy game and an 'epic' RPG) to be revealed at E3. *Hellgate*'s star billing provides the original content, in addition to what Roper sees as a symbiotic relationship – Namco stands to benefit from Flagship's PC experience, and Namco's console history could lead to console titles in the Hellgate universe.

Namco has set about transforming its new Hometek offices into somewhere between *Ridge Racer*, A Clockwork Orange and 2001. The striking design will carry through into its E3 booths, where the first pseudo-public unveilings of its PC lineup, including a fresh hands-on demo build of *Hellgate*, will take place



"I don't really know how any of my ideas come to me – I came up with *Diablo* when I was in high school, so some themes just brew for a long time," says designer and programmer **Dave Brevik**. "At the time, *Diablo* was a technological leap as well as a fun game, and that's the same kind of philosophy that I wanted for this new studio – that we can not only push the technology, but we can make something fun to play. And this idea melded those goals together."

"Dave's actual initial pitch was: 'Randomised RPG, firstperson perspective'," remembers Roper. "And we spent half an hour trying to figure out how that would suck. [Laughs.] That's the acid test. Then, I think Max [Schafer, fellow co-founder] – because Max has an architectural background – said: 'Oh, we should do it in London'. Pretty soon we realised there was this whole underground aspect, these modern dungeons, and it went from there."

"'A cross between a firstperson shooter and *Diablo*'," offers Brevik with the satisfaction of a man who has the golden pull-quote.

"Yeah. And that's really been since day one," nods Roper. "I think about two weeks went by and we had the wireframe engine up."

Today, Flagship's in-house engine – the intricacies of the game system and randomly generated levels required a bespoke effort – is well beyond wireframes, ably portraying an ashen, haunted London beneath the pall of a hellspawned nuclear winter. If the post-apocalyptic gloom isn't an immediately remarkable look (even for Flagship, as there's an indelibly *Diablo* murkiness to it all),





The Jacklight provides an example of an indirect weapon, generating a radial blast: characters also possess aura-based skills, encouraging banding together





Topside, underground and interior sections (such as St Paul's and Big Ben) will feature, but we've only yet seen Covent Garden streets

then the location certainly is. *Hellgate*'s London streets may be built from algorithms rather than plans successively military, occult, and utilitarian, but they're still hardwired into generations of turmoil: great fires and plagues, the Blitz, the riots, the boarded-up storefronts of urban decay. By playing off select imagery – occasionally token imagery, as British Telecom may never have installed as many red telephone boxes as are scattered in *Hellgate*'s rubble – rather than direct recreation, it's both otherworldly and disarmingly familiar, suggesting Flagship's photographic research may have captured the city's soul.

As ghouls lurch from bombed-out facades and bestial demons bay in Covent Garden's abandoned bus lanes, there's a moment where the game could be an Anglophile *Doom* sequel, a moment lasting until your first kill's death throes kick up an item – a Templar-issue spectral pistol, perhaps, or a saint's finger-joint, ready to be jury-rigged as a sacred power source. At a keypress, a reassuringly dense inventory overlay flicks in from the screen's edges with a perfectly judged clunk; while only a working prototype of the bruising Templar character class is on show, currently undisclosed classes are waiting in the cloisters to round out multiplayer parties. Each glimpse of a placeholder system hints at the depths of number crunching that will accompany the bloodletting, and also what a colossal undertaking it is for a small studio – then again, their previous title was hardly light on detail.

"*Diablo 2* was a gigantic..." Brevik trails off, lost in remembered crunch time. "God. It still gives me a little chill. When I was the president of Blizzard North, running that project almost killed me, literally. And I vowed I'd never do something like that again, and now I think we're going to do something like that again." He and Roper laugh. "So I must be a glutton for punishment, but we really like what we do, even though it takes a long time to recover from the experience. You give it so much effort – I was working 15-hour days for about eight months on *Diablo 2*, and the last few months I took Sundays off, sometimes."

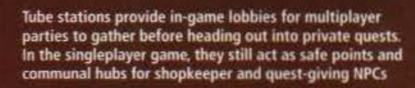
"We had to *mandate* Sundays off," Roper picks up. "Which was difficult, because there wasn't any parent company telling us to work like that, it was personal drive. And I think we've gotten a little better about it, because we're all older" – "It made me five years older inside of a year," grimaces Brevik – "and have families now... I think some elements will be a little easier, and others will be way harder. There may end up being zero net difference between the two. The upside is that even if it's the same amount of work, so much of it is

ALL THE MODDED THINGS

Diablo 2's most popular feature (and most imitated, with diminishing success) was the ability to fashion your own unique equipment by plugging in upgrade items, and *Hellgate* looks to comprehensively one-up that game's DIY aspect. Modifiers are visibly affixed to the host weapon, leaving fully decked-out guns bristling with arcane overcharging. Players who hoarded upgrades and items but could never quite commit to fusing them together will be heartened to know that a less irreversible construction system is being considered.

Character appearance will also be more open to customisation, with classes no longer bound to a fixed gender, and combat wear skewing between the extremes of hydraulic-assisted plate-mail or protective tattoos. A thirdperson 'vanity camera' option will be on hand to showcase more than your character's wrists and gauntlets.



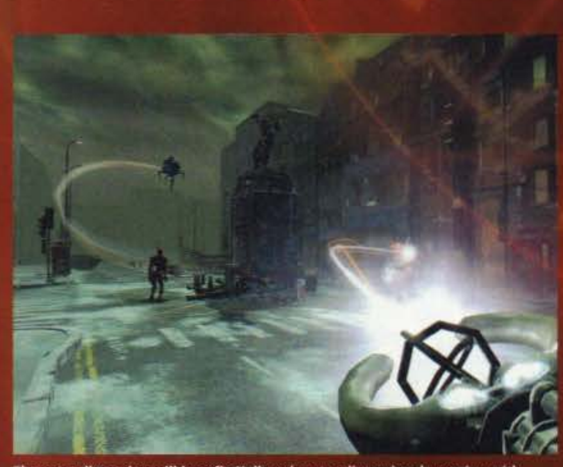

Tube stations provide in-game lobbies for multiplayer parties to gather before heading out into private quests. In the singleplayer game, they still act as safe points and communal hubs for shopkeeper and quest-giving NPCs



new work, not just: 'Oh, here's where we do this again'. There's an air of familiarity, but there's a lot of new challenges."

It looks to be a similar sensation for the player, unseated from the action-RPG's traditional omniscient viewpoint and pitched down among the demons with all the vulnerabilities of firstperson perspective. "It's a totally new interface for us – no more mouse cursor!" Brevik grins. "That's something we've never done before."

Hellgate's interface draws on familiar signifiers from both the FPS genre and Flagship's back catalogue: the minimalist screen displays and corner-slung gun barrels recall the former, but the iconic displays for actions bound to each mouse button are futureproofed *Diablo*. Similarly, combat is still broadly a matter of point-and-attack, with most weapon impacts triggering area damage effects and therefore never demanding headshot-perfect accuracy (pointedly, there's no locational damage, just hits and misses). On a mechanical level, *Hellgate*'s expansive arsenal is updating a yew tree's worth of magic wands, often reproducing familiar *Diablo* spell patterns – target-leaping chain lightning, scattershot electrical charges, radial blasts.


The extra dimension will benefit *Hellgate*'s extra-dimensional enemies, with more airborne creatures and massive, player-dwarfing monstrosities promised


Flagship has renewed (almost dauntingly) the endless reserves of conversation that made COO Roper the public voice of Blizzard

Melee combat also remains an option, with at least the Templars intended to be as handy with a longsword as a slugthrower. Sadly, the proof of that boast was absent from the presentation build, with close combat implementation a current focus of development. "We all pretty much agreed that in every game we've played, melee from firstperson was... not good," explains Roper. "So we've been experimenting with thirdperson views – but we want to make it work well, whether that's having your guy fully in the plane of view, or what if the guy's on the right side of the screen, almost like your weapon is? We have an organic development process, which some people found difficult to get their heads around, but Namco grasped it pretty quickly. *Hellgate*'s been played in some form since the third or fourth week we've been working on it: just to iterate and try it, try it, try it. It was wireframes and boxes – an item drops and it's just a box called 'Item 2', but that lets us know that items are spawning. You pick up Item 2 and it changes your stats, so we know that's working. Building piece by piece lets you see when things aren't working and just tear them out. We throw tons of stuff out..."

"The skill system," prompts Brevik.

"Yeah, we had a whole concept for a skill system that we talked about, did some early planning on, and then when it started getting into a deeper implementation Dave was like, 'That's not going to work: it's going to be too complex, people aren't going to understand it. Let's try something different'. The skill tree in *Diablo 2* is a great example: there was a wholly different way to do skills in *Diablo 2*, and as I recall Dave had an epiphany in the shower, and came into work and said: 'Skill tree! Skills are being done totally differently!' I was down at Blizzard South and got a phone call later that day saying: 'OK, we need an extra four months to completely rewrite the skill system'. But I knew it would make a better game, because



TRANSGLOBAL UNDERGROUND

First introduced to us under the working title of *Underground* – immediately suggestive to a European audience, at least – we asked after *Hellgate*'s title change.

"Underground was kind of passive as a term, and the London Underground is a trademark," explains Brevik. "And then there were all these games coming out that were such-and-such Underground."

"We've gone through... oh, God, hundreds of names," continues Roper. "I really like *Hellgate: London*, and Dave's the person who likes it least in the company. But he's finally coming around." He shoots a glance at Brevik, who dryly concedes: "I've accepted it."

The 'Hellgate: Location' formula certainly suggests franchise potential, we venture after the laughter has died down, and Roper agrees: "The idea is that London is where this has occurred, but certainly it isn't the only place it would happen. So it gives us that whole *GTA* thing. What's fascinating is that any major city you can think of has this underground element – Paris has the catacombs, New York has the subway system – once they reach a certain size, there's always a city beneath the city. And we love that because it gives us places to have modern-day dungeon crawls. Which are fun, and always filled with lots of loot."



"I say this because I'm not one, but I love working with geniuses," Roper says of Flagship. "We could build the whole game with just these 22 guys, only it would take too long – so we identify where we can work with people out-of-house"

they'd been playing with the current system for months, and could see even in theory the new version was better than the practice they had going on. So having the game constantly running, constantly being played, gives so many good areas of feedback."

Even with a development team that doubles as the game's most critical playtesters, *Hellgate*'s hasn't been entirely insulated from outside opinion, as Brevik notes: "You have to listen to feedback from your friends you bring in, from QA, from your PR people – from all walks of life – and understand where they're coming from and use that feedback wisely." And there's a speaker-bursting storm of feedback coming: not just from an imminent E3 playable demo showing, but from a dedicated fan community that has been following the game through one-and-a-half years of development on nothing but a trickle of concept imagery and promise. "It's flattering and difficult," Roper says. "I have to give amazing props to our fan community, especially the ones who started fansites when all they knew was the name of the company. It's really humbling that they've liked what we did in the past and took the chance that we were going to make something else they were going to like."

Hellgate's challenge is twofold – justifying their faith even with its sweeping changes, and levering those changes to draw in gamers left cold by being kept at mouse pointer's length from the action in *Diablo*. The initial sensation is that it can achieve both, though appraising a title at this stage in development carries inevitable caveats of balancing and tuning: whether character advancement will describe that perfect curve of demands and returns, if reward will be constant but never quite eclipse risk, if character types are be compelling enough to drive singleplayer yet be symbiotic in multiplayer. Flagship's trump card is the solid gold-mastered proof that the studio has already succeeded twice before. As to how that confidence informs development, the answer appears to be 'cautiously'.

"It's let us take a couple of things in bigger leaps, like doing 100 weapon types," says Roper. "A hundred sounds crazy, but we know that's actually a number we can achieve. Or the number of mod types, and how they affect weapons. Dave and Erich [Schafer] worked on all the skills for *Diablo 2*, Erich and Peter [Hu] did most of the items – Peter specifically did the entire 1.10 patch, and that revamped everything all over again: all the skills, all the items. So when we brought him here he was like: 'OK, this is how the items have to work now'. It doesn't mean it's a slamdunk, and we can crank it up without caring, but it gives us a footing that makes us very unique as a team – to be able to make a game that has all these random elements."

"But when we come up against a wall, I panic," laughs Brevik. "I think there's a lot of pressure because we've done it before. I know I have the confidence to do it again, but I don't want to be too cocky about it – it's a lot of work, and you've got to have the patience and insight to see when something's working or not... we're going to be very careful about what we do." We feel an old-school Blizzard North statement coming, and Brevik doesn't disappoint: "When it's done, it's done. When it's ready."

On thoughts of retaking St Paul's from the True Demon garrisons, sparring with nightmares in the Bakerloo line plague pits or desperate firefights on the hallowed ground of Hawksmoor's lost churches, the wait for Hell to freeze London over isn't going to be easy.

"I have to give props to our fan community. It's really humbling that they've liked what we did in the past and took the chance that we were going to make something else they were going to like"

Being composed of the core Blizzard North nucleus gives Flagship over a decade of community in addition to the usual binding spirit of an (intentionally) small independent. Impromptu design/social meetings ebb and flow through the airy office: after hours, regular gaming nights draw developers from across the state







A legend reborn

Link is back – but not quite as you've ever seen him before in Nintendo's golden send-off for the GameCube

"I'm sorry," says **Eiji Aonuma**, producer of what is currently known only as the new *Legend of Zelda*, with a typical self-deprecatory chuckle. "I'm very sweaty." He carefully wipes down the GameCube controller with a tissue before handing it over.

His clammy hands might be down to performance anxiety in this self-confessed "very terrible gamesplayer" after a string of embarrassingly comic defeats in the horseback boss battle he's just been demonstrating. But they also might, unlikely as it may seem, be down to nerves. A private, hands-on preview of a major title, ahead of any public showings and many months before release, is a rare event at Nintendo's Kyoto HQ. Whatever its reasons for this uncharacteristic flirting with the press, it's no surprise to find Nintendo a rather coy, not to say chaste, first date.

"What we can show as of today shall be rather limited," confesses Aonuma, and indeed he reveals little more than the game's opening location, a few training minigames, and its much-vaunted horseback combat system. Anxiously, he admits to finding it very difficult to piece together a convincing demo at such an early stage, but promises the E3 version will be more polished and substantial. When pressed for story or gameplay details, he is tight-lipped, vague, or laughingly mysterious.

There are many other questions that beg to be answered, however. Who exactly is Aonuma, the man Shigeru Miyamoto has chosen as custodian of the *Zelda* series, his second most precious creation? To what extent is he the true creator of the games now? And, more to the point: who is this scruffy teenager standing in the middle of the screen?

"When you start playing the new *Legend of Zelda*, you are going to learn that Link..." Aonuma pauses, and corrects himself with emphasis: "Well, this person... is actually a cowboy." Link's identity and the sequence of his (or their) adventures have always been fairly fluid, and lately both *The Wind Waker* and *The Minish Cap* have seen him start in civvies before inheriting the legendary green mantle. But he's certainly never had a day job before.

Link's vocation partly reflects his increased age. It also roots him firmly in the ordinary farming community where the game begins, tentatively called Toaru Village ("Toaru, in Japan, simply means 'anonymous' or 'certain', that kind of name," explains Aonuma). It has subtler hints, too: of a game set in a wild frontier, and as will be revealed, one where Link's interaction with animals is going to play a crucial role. More prosaically, it explains his facility in the saddle from the off. Even before he's left the village, Link is rounding up cows and jumping high fences on horseback.

HACK IN THE SADDLE



The centrepiece of this demonstration (and most likely the focus of upcoming playable E3 code, too) is a chance to sample an imaginative, two-stage boss battle, highlighting the dramatic horseback combat Nintendo has been so keen to promote.

The first stage sees Link chasing a fat, huge-horned moblin astride an armoured boar, all the while being harried by a small army of henchmen wheeling around on mounts of their own, two to a saddle. There's a fine balance to be found between hanging back to pick off pursuers and keeping up enough momentum to jump fences and get within swinging distance of the fleeing boss. Refreshingly, there are no attack routines, weak points or walls: this is freeform, busy, organic combat in an area defined only by where your enemy leads you. Get in enough hits and he'll lead you to a narrow bridge where he engages in a deadly game of chicken.

This Link is a more accomplished equestrian than his N64 counterpart, and his steed is more agile than Epona. As before, the horse is urged on with the A button (the recharging meter this time is lashes, not carrots, a subtly grown-up touch). But it steers more willingly, and can perform quick stops and about-turns by rearing onto its hind legs.

Combat has been grafted on to this so simply and intuitively, it's second nature. Lock-on, sword attacks (including the pent-up spinning slash), and bow and arrows all work exactly as they do on foot, and *The Wind Waker's* gratifyingly visceral strikes have been amplified yet further. It's a slender, but very encouraging glance: this game has greater potential for grand action set-pieces than any previous *Zelda*.

"From the very early stages of the game's development, we decided that from the beginning the player character shall ride on a horse and explore a huge area." The central importance of the horse, and the sheer scale and freedom of the playing field, are stressed several times. Aonuma draws a parallel with *The Wind Waker's* ocean, and indeed what little we see of the wide prairies Link will be roaming Wild West-style seems just as vast, and as featureless.

There's another name that Aonuma is more keen to invoke, however: "We are going to come back to the theme of *Ocarina Of Time*, in a sense. We are going to provide a huge area, and it's almost up to the players what they are going to do or what they are not going to do at all." It's as clear from this preview as it was from the trailers shown at E3 2004 and at GDC a few months ago that this game is in the serious, epic mode for which many *Zelda* fans have been in a state of unrequited longing ever since they finished *Ocarina*. Spurring your steed across open grassland at sunset, it's easy to believe that *Ocarina's* very first image – of Link galloping in silhouette across the horizon at the start of that classic, elegiac intro – is the mainspring from which the new game draws all its style, and its soul.

Ocarina Of Time was the first *Zelda* game Aonuma worked on, but his personal history with the series goes back further than that. The mellow-voiced, watchful 42-year-old from Nagano describes himself as an "avid fan." Ten years ago, he made his admiration obvious for all to see.

Aonuma joined Nintendo straight out of college in 1988, with a degree in composition design. He began as an artist, and his very first task was to adapt the sprites for a special version of *Mario Bros*, promoting a food company, for the Famicom Disk System (fittingly, he was reinterpreting Miyamoto's work from the start). But when he was finally given free rein to direct one of his own game proposals – an action-RPG for the SNES called *Marvelous*, never released outside Japan – his primary influence didn't take long to surface.



The spinning sword attack is performed as it always has: hold down and release B. Controls seem the same as previous 3D *Zeldas*, with a button display for items and context-sensitive cues



Aonuma is amused by the idea of the new look being a Lord Of The Rings influence: "When I saw one of the film's enemies on a horse, I thought maybe they were thinking of Ganon!"

"*Marvelous* was said to be similar to *The Legend Of Zelda* in terms of gameplay, and as a matter of fact… I really wanted to incorporate some essence of *Zelda* into it." If it was intended as a calling card, it worked. Miyamoto noticed the sincere flattery, and approached him, asking if he was interested in making *Zelda* games. "I said: 'Yes!'" He was made a key member of the *Ocarina Of Time* team, with responsibility for the dungeon design.

Even with years of hindsight, the epic

> **"We are going to come back to the theme of Ocarina Of Time. We are going to provide a huge area, and it's up to the players what they do"**

gestation of that game overwhelms Aonuma. "The thing with *Ocarina Of Time* is that in order for players to have new experiences, we have to extend the field. In order to expand the field we need manpower, we need data, we need additional hours of hard work. In the end we spent three years in order to complete *Ocarina Of Time*, one single game." The result was towering, but so were the expectations it raised, and the implications for the continuation of the series were daunting indeed. Miyamoto, Aonuma and their colleagues have been wrestling with them ever since.

Their first answer to the problem was daring and experimental, but arrived at through simple logic. "If we cannot expand the area, the game field, what should we do? Our conclusion was, let us use time." So it was that *Majora's Mask* and its strange, looping structure, came into being. Aonuma was made director of "the whole process" under Miyamoto's watchful eye as producer. He explains how the game's unusually rich supporting cast and mature storytelling were consequences of the three-day timeframe: "We hadn't had enough discussion about how we could describe the flow of time in the gameplay, and in the end we decided to show time passing we really have to depict each character, each human being as having his or her own life, and it's something like a drama."



The villagers' style of dress is an arresting mix of historic Japanese attire and Mad Max bandit chic. It's the most confident and individual stylistic touch yet seen from the game, suggesting it may yet wander from the well-trodden path

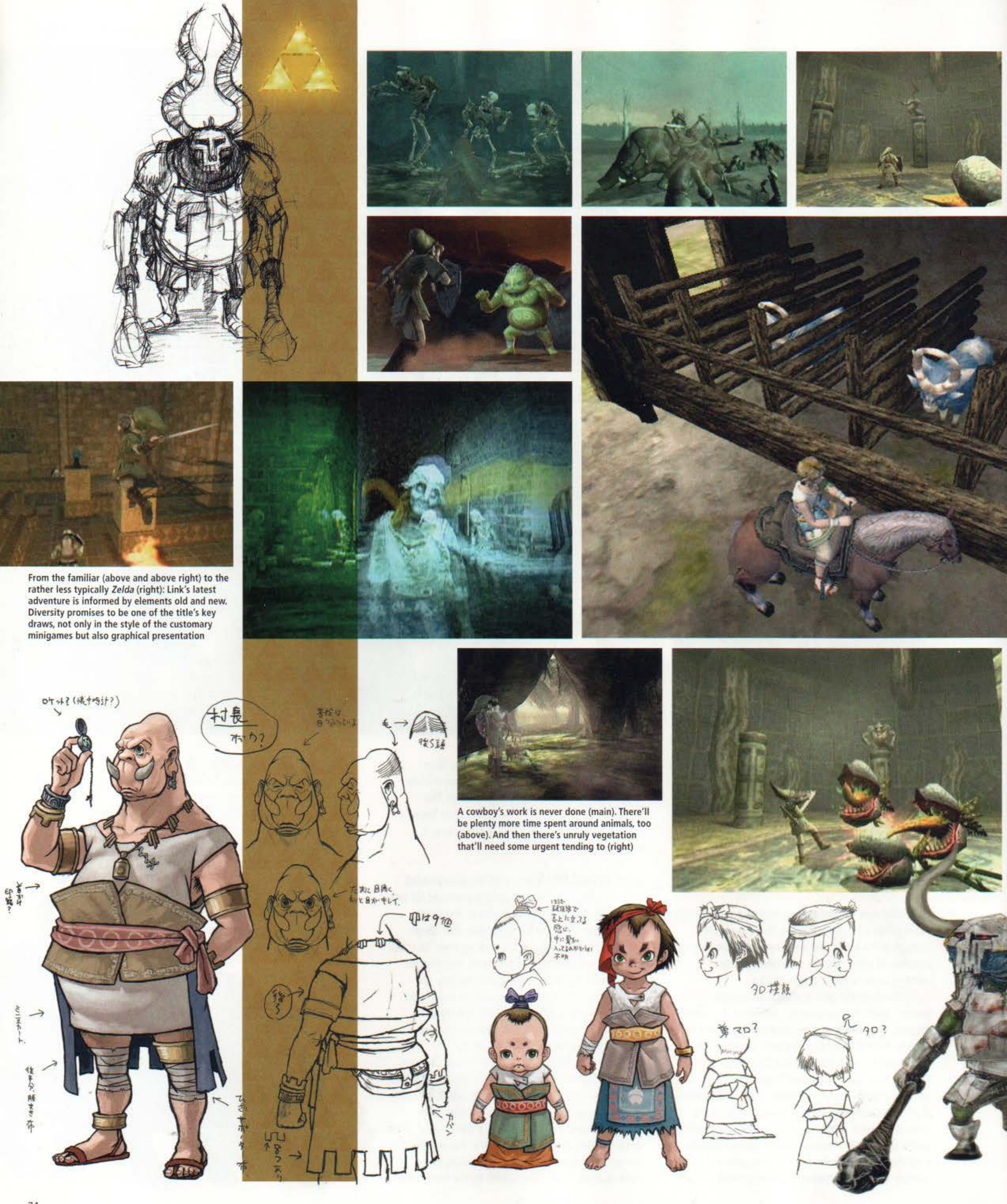
Necessity was the mother of invention, invention the mother of sophistication. But the result, though still a landmark exploration of what is possible in videogames, was deemed too cumbersome to be a viable model.

"I think in the end it stands as a great game," says Aonuma now, "however, for some players, they say that they cannot afford the time to play with that kind of system... If they are supposed to sit in front of the TV set for say one hour or two, but they need to go to certain areas in order to save the data, that's not a game that they can freely enjoy." It was back to the drawing board. With Aonuma as director again, under producers Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka, a solution was sought to satisfying players' hunger without incurring a development time that would leave them more starving than hungry. "So we thought that, OK, we should come back with the original theme of *The Legend of Zelda*. We are going to have some huge fields once again, and in that case, it was the ocean."

The Wind Waker – not the loved/hated *Majora's Mask*, nor the reviled *Adventure Of Link* – is the most contentious game in the *Zelda* series. It doesn't take long for any discussion among *Zelda* fans to turn to raking over its coals: the controversial visual treatment, the slender conclusion, the long stretches of sailing. Its startlingly stylised shadow looms as large over this new game as the infamous Spaceworld demo (that so closely resembles the current graphical approach) loomed over it.

One more time: is the stark shift in style an attempt to heal the rift in the fanbase *The Wind Waker* caused? Aonuma will only admit to being picking a look appropriate to the story they wanted to tell, in each case. "In the case of *The Wind Waker*, as you know, there was a cheerful boy as the main character... and also, as we were going to have the ocean as the main stage, we really wanted to develop a kind of a fairytale, so that's why we thought that the toon-shading was the best method to depict that kind of theme. In the case of this *Legend Of Zelda* game, we are not thinking about one of those fantasy fairytales at all, but more a realistic game with a huge scale, and a much more serious atmosphere."

Aonuma betrays some frustration at the narrow portrayal of the game's tone as 'dark' or 'mature' (as if any previous game



From the familiar (above and above right) to the rather less typically *Zelda* (right): Link's latest adventure is informed by elements old and new. Diversity promises to be one of the title's key draws, not only in the style of the customary minigames but also graphical presentation

A cowboy's work is never done (main). There'll be plenty more time spent around animals, too (above). And then there's unruly vegetation that'll need some urgent tending to (right)





One area of concern is that the environments are plain and lack atmosphere, but we've only glimpsed parts of the world

in the series had restricted itself to such a monochrome mood). "Making it dark is not necessarily our intention," he says, firmly. "Because we have shown the battle scenes in the E3 video footage and so forth, and mainly they used some of the darker images in that footage, you may have that impression of the game. But the fact of the matter is that, as you could see in the Toaru Village sequences, sometimes it's a rather bright and cheerful atmosphere that we are going to incorporate."

When it comes to another side of *The Wind Waker*'s thorny legacy, however, Aonuma's defiance melts away, and honest contrition takes its place. How would he answer those critics who say the game feels unfinished, or shortened? He smiles sadly and shakes his head. "I think that that's my fault. To tell the truth, originally we were thinking about something bigger, and in order to make it on time we had to make it more compact-sized. But even though I say compact, we were trying our best so that we could entertain people enough. That was our intention and I thought that we could do that. But if people are feeling that way, that was my fault for lack of effort, and of course when it comes to the new *Legend Of Zelda*, I really don't want to have that kind of impression from the players."

So how is he going about avoiding it? This time, the answer to players' insatiable demands of the franchise seems to be variety. "What we really want to emphasise is the many different gameplay styles and emotions you can get from experiencing the many different events and games in the new *Legend Of Zelda*. The main theme in the end shall be, you know..." – he shrugs – "play. Entertainment!"

For now, building a picture of this multi-faceted entertainment is a matter of returning to Toaru Village, and judging a book not so much by its cover as its first page, combing every line for clues. Aonuma demonstrates a fishing minigame (another *Ocarina* touch, but only included "as an experiment" for now, he warns) from aboard a canoe, perhaps a hint that Link's boating days are not entirely behind him. A tightly zoomed camera tracks the bait, showcasing the breathtaking, refractive clarity of the water.

At this stage it's easily the most impressive visual element, but Aonuma points out that it's not just decorative. "Because *The Wind Waker*'s water was not transparent, we couldn't do a lot of the events or tricks by utilising water," he notes. "But now as you can see the water is always transparent or half-transparent, so we are thinking about including many tricks by utilising that." Coming from the chief architect of *Ocarina*'s notorious Water Temple, this information ought to cause joy and despair in equal quantities.

Another tiny moment, a more substantial clue: Link picks up a miaowing cat, recalling a similar scene from the GDC trailer. "One of the themes this time in the new *Legend Of Zelda* is the communication with animals," Aonuma says casually, making Link stroll around with it clutched to his shoulder. Care to elaborate?

"In the past, these animals were there in order for us to describe the human history or human story. But this time I was thinking about putting more emphasis on the communication with, on encountering the animals. Link is going to encounter many animals in the course of the game, and sometimes animals are going to give him a helping hand. But of course it's not always easy – he has to learn how." This is as close as we can currently get to the game's true hook: perhaps Link will be able to command the world's fauna as he once commanded time, or the winds. It's an immediately enticing prospect with almost limitless possibilities, and it lends even more resonance to that teasing image that closed the GDC trailer: a wolf howling sorrowfully at the moon. Is that wolf an important figure?

Aonuma chuckles ruefully and looks at the floor. "I'm afraid I cannot tell you exactly what kind of role the wolf is going to have. I think at the E3 show we are going to show you many other things about *The Legend Of Zelda*, and the wolf is going to become one of the most important themes for us to reveal at the E3 show." The answer is yes, then. And if you don't know why already, chances are you'll know soon.

After directing two games, co-producing *Four Swords Adventures* and acting as adviser on the outsourced development of *The Minish Cap*, Aonuma has set the seal on his rule over the franchise by assuming the role of producer from

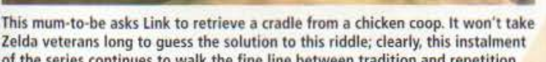
TITLE: **THE LEGEND OF ZELDA (WORKING TITLE)**
FORMAT: **GAMECUBE**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBC**



The horseback battle takes place on a gently rolling plain. There are no barriers to exploration visible between foreground and glowering horizon: this is truly open country

"What we want to emphasise is the many different gameplay styles and emotions you can get from the many different events and games"





This mum-to-be asks Link to retrieve a cradle from a chicken coop. It won't take Zelda veterans long to guess the solution to this riddle; clearly, this instalment of the series continues to walk the fine line between tradition and repetition





The climactic game of chicken requires you to build up speed, swerve at the last moment to avoid being barged into the abyss, and use a well-timed swing to send your brutish foe flying. It's a simple, tense, original scenario, if a little frustrating

MUTE AS A BUTTON



Once again, all speech in the game will be handled in text. According to Aonuma, this is no cost-cutting exercise, but crucial to bringing the game to life for players. "The reason why we are having players read the text in *Zelda* games is because we want them to expand their imaginations as to how these words are spoken," he explains. "We do not want to impose on players how the words are spoken in *Zelda*. I think this freedom of imagination is one of the important aspects of the franchise."

As to why Link never utters a word – even in text – the answer, of course, is in his name: "Because Link is you! You are looking things through Link's eyes, hearing things with Link's ears, and you are speaking with Link's voice. I do not want the players to feel the existence of a wall between you and Link by having Link speak with a stranger's voice."





Aonuma is at pains to point out that the 'realistic' visuals are based on hand-drawn illustrations: "Like cartoons which have a serious and realistic look, rather than comical." There's plenty of humour evident in the villagers, though

Miyamoto, heading a team that now exceeds 40 people. But this wasn't necessarily his heart's desire. Asked how it came to pass, he confesses to being unsure he wanted to make another *Zelda* game at all.

"I had worked on three different *Legends Of Zelda*... I thought I had done almost everything I could. So I told Mr Miyamoto: 'Look, I have already done that and I have already done this, there seems to be few more things that I could do with *Zelda*. So can I graduate from it?' And Mr Miyamoto said: 'OK!' So I took his word, but the next assignment he gave me was: 'You are going to take care of this new *Zelda* game'. I said: 'Wait a minute! I thought that you gave me permission to work on some other projects'. 'No, I say that you are going to be the producer, not the director, this time, and I really want you to take some distance away from the actual designing of the game but see things differently, so that you can see the whole process from a much higher-up position'." Miyamoto, it seems, is not finished with training his protégé.

Can it be that Aonuma is frustrated, shackled to another man's creation, with ideas of his own waiting to be realised? He is quick to retreat from this implication: his involvement with *Zelda* is too deep, too old, to allow it. "The fact of the matter is, I could not think about any concrete idea other than *Zelda*. As I said, my first, the very first game I hit upon myself shared some essence with *Zelda*. So, yeah, somewhere in my mind I really want to take some distance away from it, but the fact of the matter is I am more and more involved in *The Legend Of Zelda*, and sometimes I think it is a kind of... fate for me, so I should give up escaping from that!"

Is there a game outside the franchise – outside Nintendo, even – that he's particularly fond of? His answer is unsurprising, but genuinely humble, and clearly deeply felt. "Quite recently I am playing *Resident Evil 4*. That's a... stunning, a very, very nice game. Sometimes I have to feel that, yeah, they did it. I should have done it myself." He rallies his pride a little. "And sometimes I have to say that, well, maybe they are making this section in part by thinking about *Zelda*. But all in all I think they have chosen a very right direction in terms of making the game. I think I can learn quite a lot from *RE4*."

This is Aonuma to a tee: unlike his mentor, he presents himself not as a singular creative force, but a modest craftsman, constantly refining his trade, learning from his work and the work of others. He's only too ready to suggest that Miyamoto's whims and inspirations still guide the series: the idea to make Link a cowboy was borne of the legendary designer's love of Western movies; the animal communication theme has its source, like *Pikmin*, in his simple domestic pleasures. "As you know, Nintendo is introducing a quite unusual game





Producer Eiji Aonuma has experience of the series that dates back to the dungeon design of N64 classic *Ocarina Of Time*

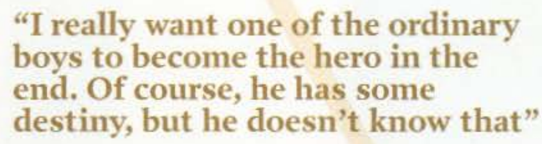
called *Nintendogs* for Nintendo DS," explains Aonuma. "Mr Miyamoto himself has a dog at his house, and he enjoys himself communicating with the dog. Probably we have some influence from Mr Miyamoto here!"

Does he not put himself into his games, just as Miyamoto's memories of the bewildering sliding screens in his parents' house famously became *Zelda*'s labyrinths? His answer is much more focused on practical application than artistic inspiration, on communal rather than personal experience, but perhaps it gets closer to the root of the series' almost universal appeal. "I think that there are a number of things that I am incorporating from my past memories, but I should say that I am doing that rather unconsciously… Of course, not everyone shares the same memories and experiences, but when we were all much younger, when we were boys and girls, we have had some similar experiences doing similar kinds of play and things. And I think in most cases, I am going to take the game in a direction that can stimulate those parts of your memory. I am trying to do those kind of tricks whenever possible. And, after all, I think that is a big part of what makes the game called *Zelda*."

Aonuma has not been made in his master's image. He's a democrat, an everyman, and nowhere is this more clearly reflected than in the one area where he claims strong creative influence: the characterisation of Link. Miyamoto's Link always started the game as a special child, orphaned, different, somehow set apart from the world he's destined to save. Aonuma's Link, the boy who starts the game at home in his own clothes, is the exact opposite.

"I think that I started that kind of custom just after I started working on the *Legend Of Zelda* series. I really want one of the ordinary boys to become the hero in the end. So, whenever I start the game, there is a boy who is one of the ordinary boys, you can find him all around. Of course, he has some destiny, but he doesn't know that, and he has to understand that he has to face the destiny anyway, and he has to overcome it to become the real hero in the game. That kind of storyline is always what I really want to describe in the *Legend Of Zelda* series… So, who Link is this time is not very important for me at the very beginning. The important thing is that he is the anonymous guy, but he is going to face with a huge destiny that he has to overcome, in order to kind of… morph himself into the hero."

As he says this, you get a strong sense that Aonuma is actually talking about himself; he's just an ordinary boy, he's saying, doing something extraordinary as best he can. If that's the case – if Link is as much of a link to his creator as he is a link to the player, and to all the other Links throughout the series' muddled history – then with this simple, subtle change, maybe Aonuma really has made the series his own, after all.



"I really want one of the ordinary boys to become the hero in the end. Of course, he has some destiny, but he doesn't know that"

This minigame involves herding cows while avoiding those horns. Since we learned that Link is a cowboy, a lasso has leapt to the top of our item wishlist











The village kids assume Link knows how to wield a sword, and demand he demonstrates his skill by clubbing a scarecrow, egging him on to ever more extravagant attacks. It's a witty, if thin, disguise for the usual tutorial. The village has a peaceful air, but that peace is protected by the heavily armed guards patrolling its pathways. The world beyond those hills is, it would seem, a threatening one

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Now playing...

God Of War

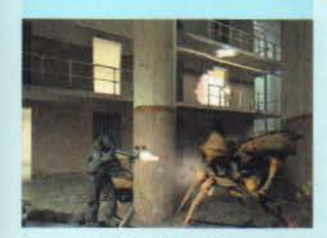
So successful a popcorn matinee that, as the closing credits roll, you may be tempted to walk right back into your virtual theatre to see it all over again in the evening show.
PS2, SCEA

Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory



This time we'll walk between the raindrops, become darker than the shadows and quieter than a muffled scream: a painstaking lap of honour for the series' best.
GC/PC/PS2/XBOX, UBISOFT

Half-Life 2



It may only have been because *World Of Warcraft*'s patch delayed play for half a day, but a return to *Half-Life 2* bears out just how much brilliance the game contains.
PC, VIVENDI

Does Xbox 360 mean Xbox RIP?

The most ill-deserved of early graves



Despite the prospect of some tempting ports – like *GTA: San Andreas* and evolved versions of *Battlefield: Modern Combat* and *Far Cry* – it's hard not to see the arrival of high-profile exclusive *Jade Empire* as marking the end of the Xbox era

Four short years. Back in May 2001 many people were still healthily sceptical about Microsoft's ability to break the console market. Even after the shock of *Halo*'s excellence, there still seemed plenty of reasons for doom and gloom: the high price, that controller, the online service which wasn't ready and not wanted by enough people.

Less than four years on, and the Xbox feels like it could go on forever. Its visual power is still being pushed, as something like *Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath* has shown. We've still only seen a fraction of what the hard drive and the Live service can offer. As the PS2 starts showing its age, and the GameCube fails to ignite Nintendo's potential, the Xbox should be striding ahead.

Instead, it's off for an early shower, although Microsoft protests that it's not being retired. Even once the 360 is launched, it says, there's no reason for publishers not to port the PS2 games they'll still be making to the system. But with stock drying up in stores, and exclusive content drying up on the shelves, there's little doubt that its glory days will soon be over.

And this month sees the last big push: Bioware's *Jade Empire*, Microsoft Game Studios' *Forza* and *Phantom Dust*, made by MGS Japan as a key part of Xbox's eastern push, and then abandoned for release in the west. Each, in its own way, shows how high the Xbox has raised the bar of our expectations. *Jade* has a level of beauty and a sense of scale which we've come to take for granted. *Forza* an elegant and extensive online service which shows it doesn't all have to be about deathmatches. *Phantom Dust* makes custom soundtracks feel like an essential addition, letting you overlay the game's rich atmosphere with your own anthems for destruction. It still feels like the future.

And it still is, of course – the Xbox 360 may have revolutionary aspects, but at its heart is an Xbox 2. More of the same, only stronger, better, faster. But while the first machine may have established Microsoft's affinity with the console market, it may have left the 360 a harder task: the Xbox is going to be a tough act to follow.









Edge's scoring system explained: 1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



JADE EMPIRE

FORMAT: XBOX PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS
DEVELOPER: BIOWARE PREVIOUSLY IN: E131, E138



Thanks to its rich eastern themes and heavy western voice work, *Jade Empire* may seem to be an unbearable culture clash, but it rarely feels that way. If this was a blockbuster kung-fu movie, it wouldn't be criticised for poor dubbing, but for a patchy cast and ungainly script

At the Game Developers Conference in March, BioWare talked openly about its seemingly rigid formula for storytelling through game structure – five per cent of prelude, ten per cent of 'linear start', and so on. As severe an idea as it may be, BioWare has little competition but itself, and so while this recipe may serve it well for some time to come, it's questionable just how much longer it'll serve its fans: it's a fact shown up a little by *Empire*'s dangerously lean opening few hours. But, whatever convergence is at work behind the scenes, it does eventually hit its intended sweet spot, meaning that once that BioWare bug begins to bite – once enough ground has been covered, enough dialogue has been absorbed, and the player begins to feel that classic adventuring sensation of escalating empowerment – it's still supremely hard to break free from the journey that unfurls before you, a narrow but double-sided RPG adventure that's eventually as winning as it is reminiscent of *Knights Of The Old Republic*.



Jade Empire does, however, tread a risky line between streamlining and dilution, one that's likely to repel as many fans as it attracts. Its character development is more PG than RPG, a detail-lite refurbishing of *KOTOR*'s upgrade system. Attributes and character enhancements are few, limited to 'techniques' (simple, permanent stat improvements) and amulet stones (gems that, again, provide improved traits, plus few secondary effects). Its trio of energy bars – health, spirit and chi – and the interaction between them, is elegant, and is one area where simplicity has been a true boon. Puzzles and genuinely profound scenarios are incredibly rare; there's nothing to match *KOTOR*'s murder trial on Manaan, for example. However, there are moments when it skims gratifyingly close, such as your infiltration and exploitation of the Lotus Assassin Guild, a setup that eerily echoes *KOTOR*'s Sith Academy episode on Korriban.

Its morality system is painted as something loftier than a simple light/dark persuasion, initially claiming that its two differing approaches to situations – Open Palm and Closed Fist – break up the karmic schism of good/evil into something far more fluid and ambivalent, but the actuality feels far less sophisticated – smash heads, or cradle them? This potential complexity is little more than a choice between strength or subtlety, but it's often hinted at during conversations with your allies, most notably Sagacious Zu, one of the game's most intriguing co-stars. To its credit, however, *Jade Empire* does seem to offer a plausible third way – of accruing riches above all else – but, ultimately, it's one that eventually falls before the inescapable duality of the game's narrative.

Regardless, its beauty is regularly something to behold. While the game's environments may feel broadly similar and be bloomed enough to give the player a tan, *Empire*'s art direction and hefty production values often meet to provide some phenomenal sights – the rainbow-

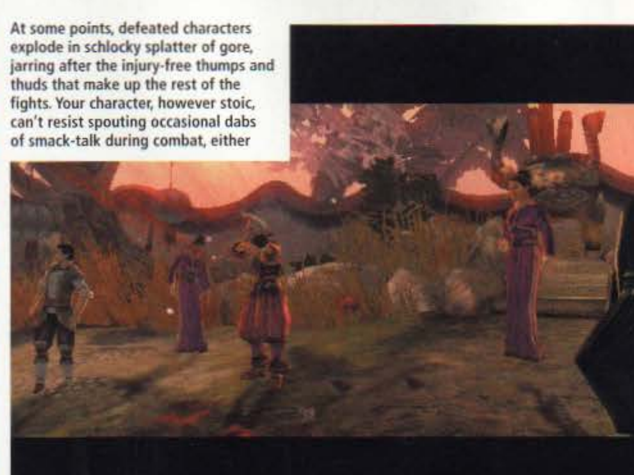


Players can take just one ally into battle. They're autonomous, but their involvement can be switched from active fighting participant to a 'support' role where they'll buffer the player from the sidelines. Henpecked Huo, however, is a support-only ally, plying the player with enough booze to fuel a powerful drunken style









At some points, defeated characters explode in schlocky splatter of gore, jarring after the injury-free thumps and thuds that make up the rest of the fights. Your character, however stoic, can't resist spouting occasional dabs of smack-talk during combat, either







Enemies differ in status as well as form, with spirits immune to weapon attacks, for example. Building your own quartet of complementing styles is key to getting the most satisfaction out of combat. For the record, *Jade Empire* is roughly half as long as the first *KOTOR*





A wide range of combat styles is available, but powering them up is a gambit. Whereas *KOTOR* allowed players to view every available upgrade from the off, with *Jade* you'll never know if a preferable style is just around the corner, causing reluctance when spending upgrade points. Here's one of the chi-sapping transformation styles – Jade Golem – in effect

infused magic of the Spirit Fox's realm, the dusky glow and detail of the Necropolis, and many later examples that can't be mentioned for the sake of plot revelations. And, while these revelations are never truly startling, there's a well-paced unfolding of the game's key characters that, if nothing else, takes the player to a fresh new marvel to play through. Of those characters, the most interesting are the most throwaway, but they're nonetheless an integral part of the show; aside from a range of pleasingly ludicrous fortune-cookie-style names, personalities such as the Magnificent Bastard prove to be memorable – as, in this example, is his debating challenge.

Combat isn't so much style over substance as styles over substance. The basic repertoire is of weak and strong attacks, with the latter requiring a charge that leaves the player open, but can also break through blocks. The facility to dodge and block is generous, but overall it's not as exciting a system to justify it being such a strong focus. And most enemies fail to be a challenge; any blocking opponent can easily be vaulted only for them to forget to turn around for several seconds, leaving their backs fully exposed. But it's *Jade Empire*'s collection of styles that brings the combat to life. Despite each one adhering to the aforementioned structure in its use, there are numerous options cast across categories of magic, support, weapon and transformation. There's no real texture to it – except, maybe for the specific series of attacks required for a Harmonic one-hit-kill combo – but there's plenty of fulfilment to be had in carving your own slight or heavy-handed path through each confrontation. And what it lacks in subtlety, it makes up for in abundance, as fights break out everywhere and can get surprisingly rowdy, allowing players to approach the fray with their own overarching style of styles.



Fights break out everywhere and can get surprisingly rowdy, allowing players to approach the fray with their own overarching style

For those versed in the ways of *KOTOR*, *Jade*'s script and universe simply won't resonate as powerfully, and its forked, non-linear structure will come across a little too much like déjà-fu. By turns, it's epic, patronising, pretty, bland, compulsive, easy to enjoy and easy to dislike. Despite its paucity of detail, *Jade Empire* is still many, many things, some fine and some poor, but for a game to contain so much is a testament to its breadth, and the reason why it'll remain a worthwhile expedition for many. Just how many, though, is something for BioWare's next production to worry about. **[7]**

House Of Flying Paggers



Bizarrely but amiably, *Jade* is home to a series of 2D shoot 'em up minigames. They're optional, and chart journeys between cities on the back of a 'flier'. They're not long or intricate, consisting of a few dull waves of enemies, and unlocked stages are stored on the title screen for highscore replay, but their worth is questionable, regardless of how charming they may appear. With the final third of the game virtually devoid of subquests (to its credit, the penultimate chapter has an interesting and welcome change of pace, and the finale is much grander than *KOTOR*'s), this is perhaps an attempt to plug the gap.





There are few fully fledged hub areas, such as the Imperial City (right), but they do feel staggeringly large and seamlessly connect to the smaller environments where the bulk of your quests will be taking place



PARIAH

FORMAT: PC, XBOX (VERSION TESTED)
PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: HIP INTERACTIVE
DEVELOPER: DIGITAL EXTREMES PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E141



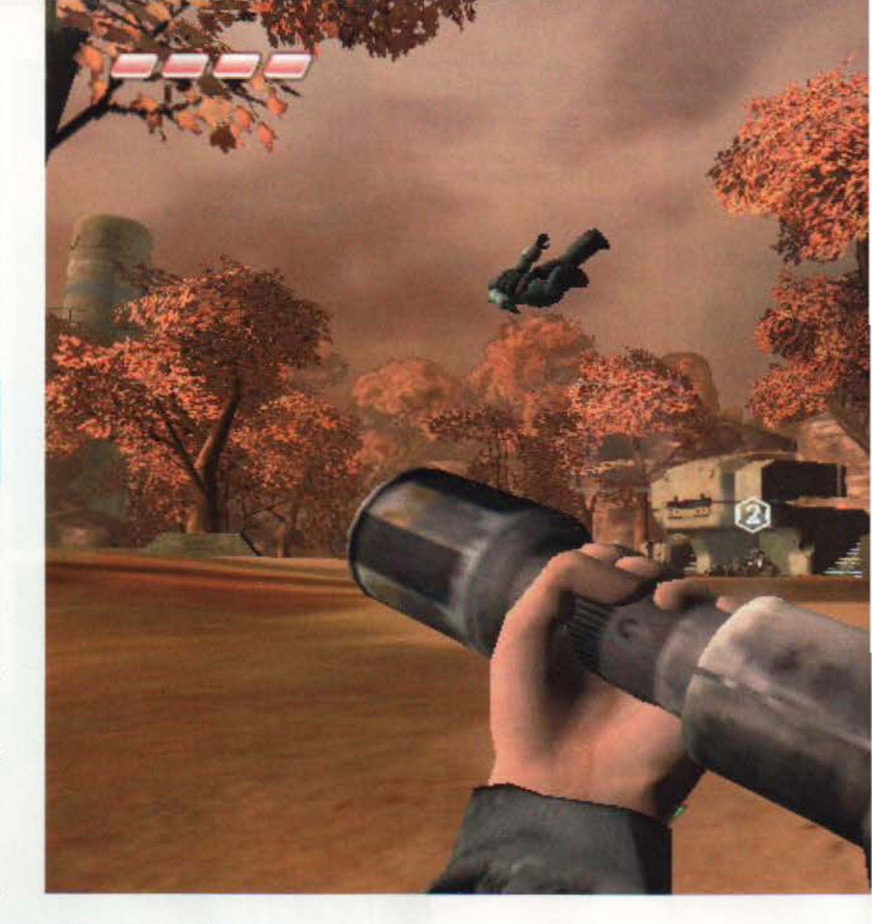


Pariah's later stages look excellent, and host some classy glass and rock textures. It falls foul of Halo's environmental repetition, though, and it doesn't have the sparkle or the interplay of weapon strategies to keep players captivated

With 'firstperson looter' becoming a more accurate description of the magpie tendencies of the FPS genre, it's no surprise that *Pariah* is so reminiscent of *Halo*. This isn't just a lazy comparison, though, nor one that's meant to reflect poorly on *Pariah*. Whereas too many shooters pilfer from Bungie's godfather, few know what to do with their gains, failing to understand the difference between functionality and forgery. *Pariah*, however, understands a flattering amount about *Halo*'s use of scale and open-plan combat – even if it's not meant to be homage, this is the closest anyone has yet come. Impressive, expansive forest clearings give way to military facilities and outposts, patrolled by guards that can sneakily sniped or engaged in the to-and-fro of a duck-and-cover fracas.

Moments like these are a regular part of *Pariah*, but they soon push home a less engaging facet: monotone enemy design. Virtually all of your opponents are gun-toting soldiers who assault in teams of three or four. Their weapons change, but their behaviours and the strategy required to tackle them rarely seem to. Later in the game, shuffling enemies crouched behind riot shields lash out with some abusive melee attacks and threaten to change the pace, but don't. And, during the game's latter third, a new enemy type is introduced via the Anvil – an impressive industrial complex whose raging battles are tempered somewhat by the repeating architecture – promising the player a part in an aggressive ménage-a-trois between warring factions, but the presence of this new foe vanishes soon after the stage is done.





After fielding a well-placed grenade, enemies cartwheel and spiral through the air in an enthusiastic slapstick show of the Havok engine

Pariah is, however, buoyed by a certain amount of energy, in both its physics and the opposition the player faces. Few objects are destructible, but those that are are well placed – barricades crumble, punctured pipes vent sprays of deadly steam and the debris from exploded barrels all get involved with uncanny timing. After fielding a well-placed grenade, enemies cartwheel and spiral through the air in an enthusiastic slapstick show of the Havok engine. And opponents make up for a lack of intelligence with sheer aggression, zig-zagging and squatting at irritating moments, often crushing the player's energy bar and rushing them with a surprising disregard for their own. When the game does choose to step away from its skirmishes, such as the repelling of dropships from a mounted gun pod on the back of a moving train, or the interception of incoming missiles fired from a nearby battleship, these sections linger for too long.



Right: vehicle sections are dull, and the handling isn't sure enough. Only once are you joined by an ally for a vehicle raid. Expanding on this, instead of leaving you solo and feeling awkward, would improve matters

Instead of the now-common restriction on your gun set, *Pariah* uses a weapon wheel. Activated by a single button and the right stick, your seven weapons become swiftly accessible once the layout is memorised. While the weapons themselves may be far from inspired, most feature useful upgrades and come with a punchy reload animations. The energy bar, too, is rechargeable – but segmented like *The Chronicles Of Riddick*'s, with the player required to retire to cover in order to recover via the use of a generously stocked healing tool. Vehicle sections are far from spectacular, and feel like obliging stretches of pace-changing to punctuate the solo campaign, not dazzling bouts of frantic hit'n'run action.

Pariah does, however, keep its finest













There's no standard melee weapon bash. Instead, the player has recourse to the Bonesaw, a jagged knife that you're very likely to forget is ever there. Instead of a general melee move, *Pariah* offers the ability to dash over a short distance, but it's another feature that's easy to overlook during play



Four vehicles feature: the Dozer, Dart, Wasp and Bogie. All are ground-based, and offer some kind of on-board firepower





These green tokens (left) are weapon energy cores, the key to upgrading your armoury. Each weapon can be modified three times, and sometimes quite significantly. Your sniper rifle, for example, turns into a fearsome threat detector with just one enhancement

environments for last, including a climactic stretch where all thoughts of balance and strategy are booted out, replaced by a tremendous duck shoot, a pyrotechnic payoff with one of the game's most stupidly powerful weapons. It's a fine and satisfying climax above the rather flat sense of progression throughout the rest of the game.

But, ultimately, it shares its problems with *Killzone*. Its glossy production – including a suitably brooding soundtrack – is deflated by a creeping sense of repetition, an absence of a certain spark that's needed to ignite the whole game from a box of fireworks into a captivating show. *Pariah* is still a worthwhile experience, just one missing that vital final flourish, an extra limb to add more meat and mobility. With the FPS realm being crushingly overpopulated, and its upper class becoming so terrifyingly demanding and particular, *Pariah*'s solidity isn't enough to allow it entry into the genre's gentry, and it's destined to remain a notable outsider, perhaps more so than its title ever intended. **[7]**

The violent cartographer



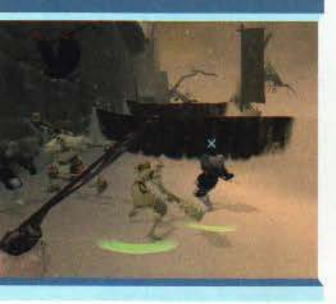
Despite not having *Timesplitters'* hobbyist detail and diversity, *Pariah* still packs a map editor, an interesting inclusion considering the game's scale and pace. The editor's themes are composed of a series of wide islands that are close relatives of the solo campaign, and feel like a release next to the maze-like intricacy of *Future Perfect*, but they're not hugely flexible. The details are limited to appearances and form of the map only: textures, land shape, building locations and sparse vehicle placements. It's an editor that feels exhausted all too quickly, and it's a shame that more features – customisable weapon locations, player spawns and more – aren't part of the package.



RISE OF THE KASAI

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (£27) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: BOTTLEROCKET
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138

Old hands



Three of *Kasai's* levels are preludes to *The Mark Of Kri*, setting the scene for both games in sepia tones as elders Baumusu and Griz face down the growing Kasai army. That force's weight of numbers puts the revised game engine through its paces, and impressively it never drops a frame as the invaders swarm the two warriors a dozen at a time – bad odds for the Kasai.

At the time of its release, *The Mark Of Kri* received a mixed reception for forging a different path to other thirdperson action titles: since then, the road more travelled has led to ever-increasing environment interaction, complexity and elasticity. *Rise Of The Kasai* wilfully ignores those advances by maintaining the first game's core mechanics, though this doesn't damn it as a button-masher so much as confirm it as a next-generation *Dragon's Lair*, more concerned with the animated beauty of response than demanding technical precision for it.

New to the game is a partner system, intended to support an online coop play element – clipped late in development, this leaves the AI to simulate human error by fumbling stealth kills or blundering into enemy view. Warrior partners are prone to charging into crowds you'd intended to pick off by strategy, and stealth partners to hang back when you need them in the thick of a brawl – a random element that could be read as poor AI by the less forgiving. Even the more forgiving will pick up on its occasional failures to prioritise mortal danger over getting to the next waypoint, or fits of determinedly sprinting into walls.

None of these glitches are fatal, but they inflict a more lingering injury on the sense of savage purpose your partner provides. When following separate paths through a level, they form a deadly ambience to the rhythm of your progression – distant cries of alarm suddenly silenced, or a mob of charging enemies struck down in their tracks by ranged attack. United, the lack of communication beyond occasional hand signals dials in to *Kri's* primal frequency – no talk and all action – disguising its limitations as a sense of wordless acknowledgement and grim determination.

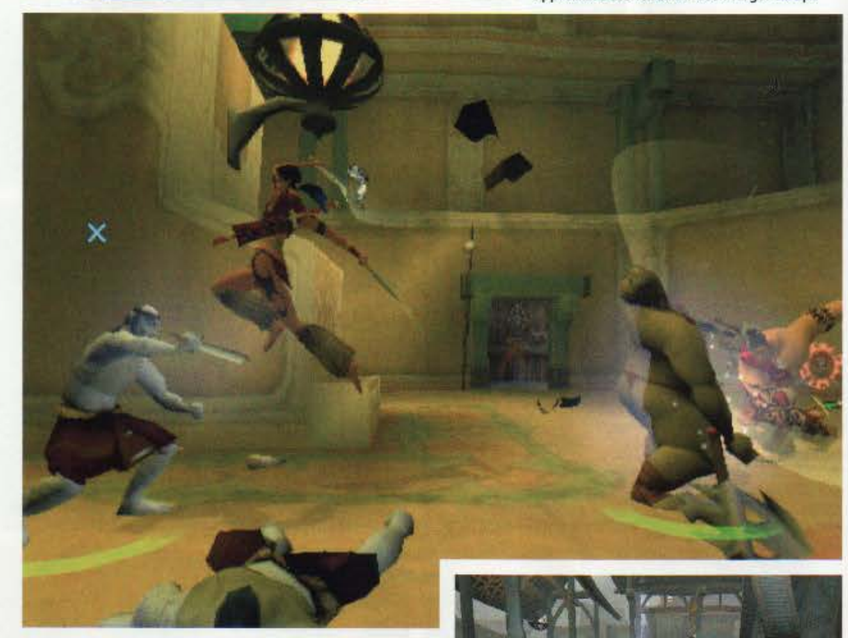
As the limb-hewing combat is now familiar, *Kasai's* draw needs to be in the thrill of exploring its new locales, and it's here the game peaks too early, in a lake town so sprawling and detailed it could sustain an RPG. The following sections are curiously exhausted, feeling less like parts of a world and more like levels in a videogame – it's testament to the voice cast's conviction that the narrator can make flicking four heavily guarded switches ring with mythic significance. While every level has its share of switch-pulling, it's most jarring when *Kasai* is dragging its heels on the final levels instead of pounding out a crescendo.

Though the game's confidence falters, its storytelling never does, building a new myth with the kind of passion and resonance expected from an eastern retelling of an old one, and enriching the entire sweep of its universe – the first title, *Kasai* itself, and the alluded-to final chapter. Should BottleRocket deliver that third game, it needs to improve upon the game design with the same prowess as it has the artistic vision: but for that vision alone, *Kasai* is still a triumph. **[6]**

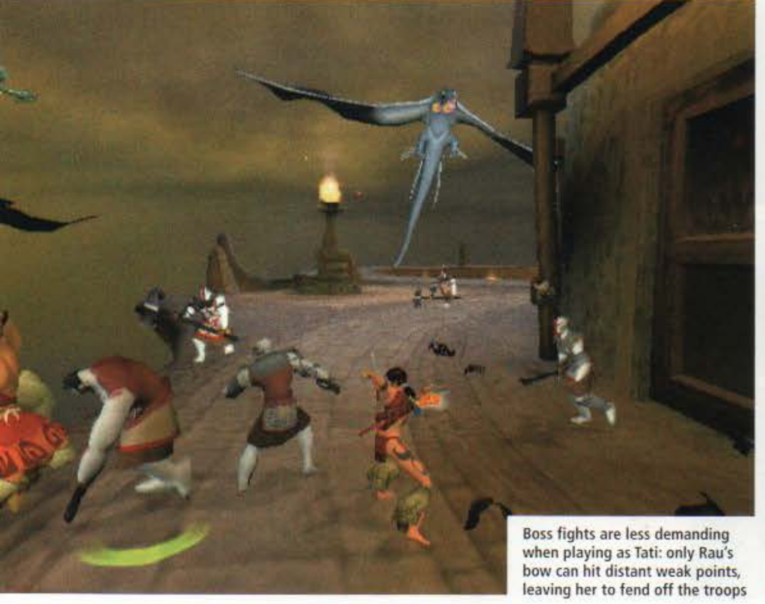




***Kri* players who were unimpressed by the final level's chopping spree are unlikely to appreciate the focus on even larger scraps**



Unfortunately, the strategic elements in level design that went underplayed in *Kri*, such as choosing the right weapon for each area or using wildlife as diversions, are even scarcer

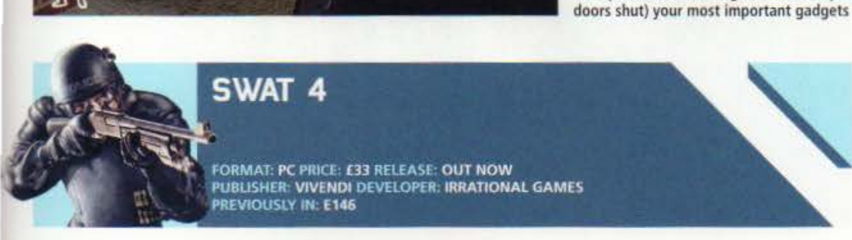


Boss fights are less demanding when playing as Tati: only Rau's bow can hit distant weak points, leaving her to fend off the troops




Doors provide a focal point for *SWAT*'s high level of drama and strategy. Hostiles can burst through at any given moment, making the opti-wand and wedge (a tool that jams doors shut) your most important gadgets


Playable by up to five people online, coop mode provides another example of this increasingly recognised game option being implemented well. A mission maker lets players tweak the existing scenarios, modifying objectives and enemy behaviour



SWAT 4

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £33 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: VIVENDI DEVELOPER: IRRATIONAL GAMES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E146


Your squad's AI-driven manoeuvres are beautifully choreographed and synchronised, officers visibly counting down the seconds before a detonation breaches a door, sometimes even passing grenades between one another to balance their inventories. The subsequent explosions are no less impressive

SWAT 4, a traditionally by-the-book simulator at heart, paints a uniquely vivid diorama of social peril, delving effectively into the extreme situations of latter-day movies – the kind you wish were confined to fiction, but know in your heart are not. Its world is populated with monsters and lunatics, totally at the mercy of their rampaging inner demons. One suspect tortures law students in his basement, casting them in grisly home movies while his senile mother, convinced that he wouldn't hurt a fly, idles upstairs. We learn this thanks to missions wallpapered from head to foot with narrative touches and characterised decals, Irrational bringing expert expository craftsmanship to each besieged location.

Though it also plays like a movie, *SWAT* doesn't do so in the way we've come to expect. Rather than inject drama through chokepoints and set-pieces, it presents missions that are each one grand set-piece unto themselves. Your overriding protocol is to bring order unto chaos, and thanks to the versatile behaviour and placement of enemies, every issued command has the capacity to blow that objective apart with one fatal shot. The squad (four officers and you, their leader) is controlled with remarkable ease via a dynamic right-click menu and context-sensitive commands. Loadout permitting, you can do anything your teammates can, from blowing open locked doors to peering beneath them and around corners with the marvellous opti-wand. A pop-up monitor allows you to split the team in two while maintaining overall control, a fixed sniper position becoming available by the same means.

In all of their regimented manoeuvres, your officers are consistently, brilliantly animated, not least when charging into a hostile room having tossed a flash grenade through the door. Though it requires a top-end gaming rig for decent performance, Irrational's use of the Unreal Vengeance engine has produced a world that's vibrant, drenched in authenticity and wholly suited to the game's sporadic pace.

It's cruelly ironic, however, that something as pedantic as *SWAT* should feature bugs that often make its objectives impossible. Finding civilians that can be neither restrained nor reported leads to dropped marks in the subsequent debriefing, making life miserable for those in pursuit of maximum scores. But when those uncooperative NPCs put a barrier between you and a primary objective, the entire mission can effectively be written off there and then, save for the pepper sprayings and other non-lethal 'suggestions' that can occasionally bring the AI to its senses. Another problem is that officers, when ordered to deploy ordnance before entering a room, can be somewhat conservative with their throwing arcs, dropping gas grenades to within a metre of the door while hostiles cock their weapons and watch.

But the game's appeal remains undiminished, the extreme volatility of its every moment carrying a reward that overshadows the annoyances. We can always rely on Irrational to make a drama out of a crisis, and so they have with *SWAT 4* – a game that never undervalues the series' nature, but imbues it with a dozen times the personality you'd expect. **[7]**


A very real sense of danger pervades every last room, cupboard and shadowy hiding place, a single shot from a desperate suspect often enough to incapacitate or kill either you or a member of your squad

Sadism Will Always Triumph



The malice shown by gamers towards the denizens of their games is governed less by their willingness to inflict it than by the degree to which they can get away with it. Though it never openly advocates the pepper-spraying of civilians' eyes from their sockets or the stimulation of private parts with a tazer, *SWAT* does feature an unhealthy selection of non-lethal but endlessly enjoyable weapons including pepperball rifles and, if you can believe this, 'less lethal' shotguns. It's remarkable, in fact, the amount of police brutality that goes unnoticed by the game's otherwise scrupulous scoring system. It's also a little suspicious how well Irrational has portrayed the agonised reactions... It's as if they were, somehow, reading our minds.



UNTOLD LEGENDS: BROTHERHOOD OF THE BLADE

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: $40 (£20) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E147

Merchant of Aven



It's debatable whether Loren Haggard, the game's sole buyer and seller of goods, has a prominent role to fill. You'll find yourself constantly trying to unload on to him the copious amount of loot that drops in the dungeons, but he never quite seems to be able to offer much in return more valuable than what you've found on your last outing, causing your gold reserves to pile ever higher and become increasingly worthless. It's a high-level balancing issue that has a negligible effect on gameplay, other than to slightly diminish the impact of loot dropping itself.

It's either an exercise in bamboozlement and sleight of hand, or the highest accomplishment of self-confident design and execution: one way or another, the team at Sony Online has managed to take a by-the-numbers hack-and-slash RPG formula and turn it into one of the most surprisingly addictive and engaging titles from the PSP's US launch library. Whichever it may be (and we're assuming it's the latter), it's a similar testament that all of the game's less attractive features can be so easily brushed aside with a rubric frequently neglected: *Untold Legends* is, to put it over-simply, outstandingly fun.

It's in the pacing, for one. As a portable title, *Untold Legends* knows that its payoff has to be immediate and frequent and it graciously complies, with even the briefest morning commute diversion yielding at least one quest completed, at least one level gained and frequently another full wardrobe change rounding off a constant feeling of accomplishment. And it's simply in the world, too. Grid-based though it may be, the locations that unfold are increasingly lush and full of character beyond the dungeon crawler's standard fare of brick, torch and sewer; the bestiary opens to reveal personality well beyond rat, spider and skeleton; each of the four classes has its own unique sets of animation and behaviours, and each weapon a distinct heft.





Though your first hours seem to consist of no more than spider, spider, skeleton, spider, rest assured a more impressive range of foes presents itself later on



The game, however, isn't without its weaknesses. The storyline is presented in too contained, too bite-sized and perhaps too eminently skippable morsels of pre-and-post-quest dialogue, and collectable journals and note entries that serve more as unwelcome inventory slot fillers. For as much as the game is able to draw you completely into the world of Unataca, the reasoning behind your wanton slaughter comes through in a series of toe-tapping impatient distractions – drawn-out exposition when a simple location pointer and a starting pistol would suffice.

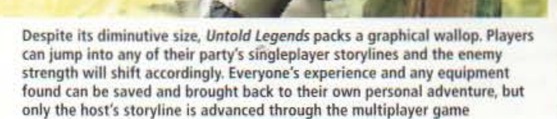
Though the game's singleplayer is a rewarding venture in itself – especially since for alchemists the loneliness can be alleviated by summoning a comically top-heavy, lumbering golem – the multiplayer is the game's primary draw, and though serviceably executed and with all the accompanying rewards of playing with a party of real live humans, it's here that the game shows more fissures in its surface: network drops are a little too frequent (turning off the PSP's WLAN powersave seems to help), and the game's flow comes to a lurching and stuttering halt as party members access their item menus.

Despite the nicks in the sheen, *Untold Legends* is a strong first volley from Sony Online, and if it's only uphill from here, we're in for a hell of a ride. **[7]**









Despite its diminutive size, *Untold Legends* packs a graphical wallop. Players can jump into any of their party's singleplayer storylines and the enemy strength will shift accordingly. Everyone's experience and any equipment found can be saved and brought back to their own personal adventure, but only the host's storyline is advanced through the multiplayer game





Lock-on is essential, available regardless of where opponents are located, providing info on their distance and what attacks can be made. Knowing the arenas is essential for effective use, though, to prevent falling out of the level while duelling



Despite being patrolled by some mysterious characters, the game's hub is pretty but sparse, and features as many loading screens as it does useful conversations



PHANTOM DUST

FORMAT: XBOX PRICE: $20 (£11) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US)
PUBLISHER: MAJESCO DEVELOPER: MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS (JAPAN)

Just 15 minutes spent in *Phantom Dust*'s haunting world is enough to wipe anyone's memory; an amnesic cloud is choking this future landscape, blanking the minds of any who dare linger on the surface for too long. An accidental metaphor for Microsoft's refusal to globally publish this deceptive thirdperson arena scrapper? However forgetful or neglectful a parent it may have had, *Phantom Dust*'s ideas have proved irrepressible enough for it to be adopted by another, and granted a budget release in the west.

Ostensibly a realtime thirdperson deathmatch game, *Phantom Dust* hides a complexity and breadth that's in league with more sedate turn-based card-battlers. Its depth is hidden by a gameworld that seems a fitting host for more frantic out-and-out blasters. Battlefields are ready-demolished urban arenas, memorials to a former civilisation shattered by the enigmatic events that drive *Dust*'s story, but ripe for further destruction via the actions of Espers – combatants able to access the powers contained in orbs scattered around these post-Armageddon landscapes. It's a disquieting and individual world, a site of extreme disaster but one populated by seemingly laidback characters as clueless to the backdrop of sinister ambience and desperation as the fledgling player. *Dust* is as unlikely a setting for a thoughtful strategy as any, and all the more likeable for it.

But it hides its depth in a far less worthy manner – by offering a singleplayer campaign that takes too long to ignite, requiring a plod through numerous dull missions while the battle system reveals itself by depressing fractions. Combat is based heavily on lock-on techniques, of equipping yourself with abilities (attributed to the pad's face buttons at the player's demand), and flinging them at the enemy while defending against incoming attacks. It seems like a stilted back-and-forth to begin with – especially thanks to the dim AI of your opponents – but soon burgeons into something far more entertaining once the interplay between different skills and status effects is given room to breathe. Indeed, *Phantom Dust* isn't a game that rewards twitch ability; despite its colour and destruction, familiarity with your library of powers is the key to winning battles.

While it feels dynamic for what is, essentially, a RPG of skill harvesting and exploiting, the end result is more about flexibility than exhilaration, more a colourfully framed and extended session of rock-paper-scissors than any kind of rush. The game's few arenas do begin to dull very quickly, though, reinforcing *Phantom Dust*'s worth among only those players who relish the idea of collecting and refining an arsenal of skills, and using them effectively. Otherwise, anyone willing to forget a game that can't thrill them within 15 minutes will become a victim of *Phantom Dust*'s world, rather than its saviour.

[7]



Dust's music is excellent, and often piped in via the tiny output of a radio pumping out an unnerving tune. Strangely, custom soundtracks are also supported; *Silent Hill 3*'s soundtrack is a surprisingly good fit





Colours play an important part, and need memorising. Skills aren't just broken up into vivid schools (colouring the vapour around a character), but also categories for Aura, Attack, Defence, Erase, Status, Environmental and Special

Dust to dust

As well as splitscreen battles, Espers can engage in fourplayer confrontations online, a feature that's a greater stage for *Dust*'s strengths than singleplayer. Forty new skills can be earned in this mode, but the effort needed is a testament to the game's requirements: a new ability for every 30 wins. It may sound intimidating, but ekes out more of the game's worth than CPU opponents, and is one of the most thoughtful counterpoints to the blur of loud, upfront conflicts that are a significant portion of Live offerings.



The game's unlockable bosses make for a varied roster, but characters and character sadly don't go hand in hand





'Breaking the gate' is required for level completion, though it's more a case of press button, question the lack of animation, receive score. Multiplayer scrambles for the gate bonus fail to be as thrilling as they suggest

Weapons such as spanners and swords can be dual-wielded, most useful when attempting to complete the game as quickly as humanly possible





SPIKEOUT: BATTLE STREET

FORMAT: XBOX PRICE: $30 (£15) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN, US) PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: AMUSEMENT VISION

Snappy campers



LAN and broadband connectivity allowed the arcade trilogy of *Spikeout*, *Slashout* and *Final Battle* to bring a heightened coop dynamic to a coin-op genre gasping for a twist. Their story, however, is the age-old backbone of the beat 'em up genre: a tit-for-tat war between marauding gangs of ruthless prettyboys. In *Battle Street*, the saga continues, ten years older but still preoccupied with Team Spike and Team Inferno. Its dramatic episodes are so spectacularly naff that only a Michael Jackson dance-off could resolve them.

A misperception of the *Spikeout* series would be that it's a deliberate throwback, born of the same nostalgic pulse that brought us *Dynamite Cop*, *Die Hard Arcade* and, have mercy, *Zombie Revenge*. But instead it's a distinct creature that deservedly occupies its own subgenre. *Battle Street*, a belated home version, represents Toshihiro Nagoshi's recognition that, in the proven stability of Xbox Live, an infrastructure exists that can bring the innovative multiplayer brawl to an exciting global arena.

The overwhelming conclusion, however, is that something major has been either overlooked or neglected: that while domestic online multiplayer may have finally caught up, the rest of the gaming world has overtaken *Spikeout* by eight years. The vocal hardcore can still leave their picket lines at Sega's door and retreat to 1997 courtesy of their interconnected living rooms, but it's likely that most will instead offer their choice of apathy or bemusement towards a game that remains unchallenged in its peculiar realm but becomes a howling anachronism when set against the modern landscape.

Battle Street mostly feels like a latecomer to the Dreamcast shindig, arriving long after the host and loitering guests have left. The signature vibrancy of Sega's visuals still has its place in this RenderWare-accustomed age, but not in a game where the humans are less characterised than the cars in *Crazy Taxi*. Cut-scenes, similarly, are rendered with the technology of yesteryear. The charismatic artwork of the 2D era may have reliably converted the genre's very camp brand of action and storytelling, but there's little to be cherished in the shark eyes and doll faces of this particular, rather malformed cast.

The game itself, for all its dated simplicity, can be enjoyable, but mostly within the comfort zone of AV's inspired online component. The voice support and satisfying stability of the experience gives us something that is, at least, different. Enemies spawn in set formations conveyed via a localised map, the influence of very linear AI then hustling them towards a team of up to four players. Despite the suspicion that the map is mere compensation for the absence of camera control, it does lend itself to a tangible strategic model. The crux of combat invariably devolves into a bludgeoning melee, but coordinated manoeuvres can substantially minimise the resulting damage. A waiting line of enemies is, after all, less effective than a surrounding mob.

But that, rather bluntly, is the game's offering. The usual DIY store of weaponry may be available – spanners, patio chairs, swords, truck wheels et al – but it adds little polish to a near-redundant mode of combat. Though a combo system does exist, it's a limited inventory of punches, kicks and charge attacks from which players will likely obtain only one or two favourable button-bashing strings. Levels feature numerous boss battles and a stream of identikit foot soldiers, but merrily send the player back to square one when their lone life is over and make the singleplayer story mode an agonising exercise in self-abuse. With a revised engine, *Battle Street* could have passed for a simple pleasure with a steep, refined learning curve. For a dwindling few, perhaps, it still might. **[4]**

The game's beauty shines through in the replays, but it's also an opportunity to see what's happening under the bonnet as telemetry data highlights the stresses and strains impacting on tyres, aerodynamics and the engine





The racing line helps new drivers and, as the colour changes – red for brake, yellow for maintain speed and green for accelerate – it proves an intuitive tool



FORZA MOTORSPORT

FORMAT: XBOX PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E147

Just so you're in no doubt about *Forza*'s raison d'etre, the initial loading screen defines the word 'simulation' every time you boot up the game. As another company already took the 'ultimate driving simulator' tag, it's interesting to see Microsoft finding ways to convince you that this is the real deal. Pop-up menus educate you about the subtleties of traction; rewards include information about ride height and downforce, and the game contains enough graphs and data to keep statisticians in the throes of ecstasy for months. But *Forza*'s strength is that it never feels as painstaking, dry or downright severe as it sounds.

The usual options to turn off driving aids are present, but even stripped down to its most uncompromising the handling model remains joyful and forgiving – at least in comparison to sterner games like *Geoff Crammond's Grand Prix 4*. Perhaps the best test of any driving sim's ability to excite and endure is not in how it plays against CPU drivers but in how thrilling it is to play against the clock, and in this respect *Forza* is not found wanting. Because there's an underlying subtlety and sophistication in the handling – and it's encouraging to see even minor damage and tyre wear affecting lap times – the compulsion to shave fractions off your records is always there.

Rival AI is pleasingly belligerent but it's also good to see opponents losing their bottle and spinning out on the final corner of an important race. This is less likely to happen when you ramp the difficulty up, though



So it's a pity, given that the engine is so finely tuned, that the structure of the singleplayer game is so prosaic. Surely there are better ways to frame a racing game other than moving through a chain of event icons until all the padlocks are removed? Along with new vehicles, courses and upgrades, credits are awarded for placing highly in races, but *Forza* doesn't become challenging until plenty of early groundwork is completed. Thankfully, vehicle restrictions placed on later events ensure that you cannot simply buy yourself a win with a flash car and a supercharged engine.

Where *Gran Turismo 4* compels you to collect, photograph and fetishise, *Forza* has no goal other than to reach level 30, but despite this the addictive Drivatar feature will keep you playing (see 'Back seat drivar'). Much of the game has also been built for online play, and though the CPU AI is generally combative, it's here that the sweaty-palmed thrill-seekers will be. Online options include joining car clubs, swapping Drivatar data, getting scores on over 1,700 leaderboards and buying cars from other players – an incredible package and another rich seam to mine for those who persevere and complete the singleplayer experience.

Forza isn't a revolutionary game, but it expands and hones features that other driving games pioneered. Whether it's braking gently into the sweep of a left-hander at the Nurburgring or nailing a hairpin around Tokyo's city streets, *Forza* successfully communicates the pleasure of racing.

[8]

Back seat drivar



The Drivatar feature in *Forza* is not so much a clever bonus as a game in its own right, and one Microsoft would do well to explore in the future. The idea is that you pass five driving tests and are scored for your performance negotiating radials, hairpins, chicanes and apexes. Once all tests are passed and the stats recorded your Drivatar can be entered into any of the Career mode events. It's wonderfully compelling watching your AI buddy competing against rival drivers, and if he's is not up to the task then you can go back to Free Training mode to brush up on the areas where he's least accomplished. Theoretically, it's possible to unlock the entire Career mode by training up your Drivatar and entering him into events, though this takes longer as he always takes a percentage of the winnings.



TOUCH! KIRBY'S MAGIC PAINTBRUSH

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥4,800 (£25)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: HAL LABORATORY

It's hard to imagine two games that could be more similar and yet more different. *Touch! Kirby* and *Catch! Touch! Yoshi* are both DS games which require you to draw platforms for your heroes to walk (or roll) on. Both recycle classic Nintendo characters of earlier eras; both preserve the essence of the original mechanic of the games they echo; both are held up as a way of quashing those who doubt what DS can bring to gaming.

And yet it's hard to imagine someone who will like them both. *Yoshi* was a reduction – a single idea honed into elaborate completion by the DS's peculiar capabilities. *Kirby* is a full, traditional platform game laden with ideas and extras, and as a consequence comes close to sinking itself. Kirby, rather inevitably, is ready to roll. Touch him, and he'll set off. Come to a gap, and you'll need to use the stylus to draw a bridge for him. Want to change his direction, and you'll need to draw in a barrier, bumping him into reverse. Tap enemies to neutralise them, and then roll into them to absorb their powers, which yet again changes the control process. Access inaccessible ledges by drawing loop-the-loops and watch Kirby stick to his rainbow road like glue, regardless of gravity. Protect him from lasers by drawing rainbow barricades; find switches and secret areas. It's a full programme, played out over eight varied levels, each with several stages, and punctuated with boss challenges.

For those who were frustrated by Yoshi's singlemindedness, this will seem like the game they were hoping for. However, in producing a more elaborate experience, *Kirby* sacrifices some clarity of design. Your magic paint is limited, and once you've used it up it takes a second or two to refill. This means if you've made an error, you can find yourself with no paint available to draw yourself a safety net. The game will always allow you a little smear of paint – enough for an emergency trampoline – but using this resets your paint supply's regeneration and it's possible to end up in a situation that's almost impossible to salvage, literally painting yourself into a corner. The wider range of interactions also makes their results harder to predict. Knowing whether or not an enemy or projectile will be able to pierce Kirby's rainbow shield is more a matter of trial and error than the careful visual code that made improvisation so viable and appealing for Yoshi. Ultimately, there isn't as much of a complete sense of control as there could be.

But while it is a little hampered by its scale and scope, *Kirby* remains imaginative, detailed and demanding. Unlocking every character, every tune, every paint pattern and finding every hidden corner is an absorbing challenge. Visually striking and technically inventive, it's exactly the kind of game that Nintendo promised the DS would deliver. **[7]**

HAL's magic paintbrush



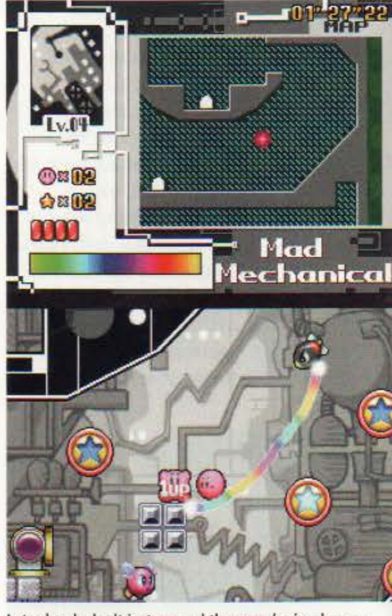
The worlds which Kirby explores have a vibrant variety which many of the best platform games share, but a real surprise comes in some of the art direction of the game's general presentation. Each world is represented by a small painting, all startlingly stylised, unusually beautiful and in some cases strikingly abstract. At a time when gaming's artistic range is shrinking, as realism dominates more and more, the DS – with titles like this, *Meteos* and *Electroplankton* – is becoming a bastion of pure invention.



As is tradition, Kirby can absorb his enemies' power by defeating them. These add even greater complexity to the game – the Tyre mode adding bursts of speed and ability to blast blocks. Stone mode lets Kirby sink to the bottom of underwater sections, bonking vulnerable enemies' heads on the way



Kirby has always been one of Nintendo's sugariest characters, something this game revels in, bundling a pink stylus with the Japanese code. In the US, however, it's been renamed as *Canvas Curse* with a butch Kirby glaring out of the cover art



Later levels don't just expand the game's visual range, they also add depth to the gameplay. These bumper balls turn levels into huge pinball tables, forcing lightning reactions to improvise rainbow routes to control Kirby



ARCHER MACLEAN'S MERCURY

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: $40 (£25) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: IGNITION DEVELOPER: AWESOME STUDIOS PREVIOUSLY IN: E144

M*ercury* is a PSP game that's more about Portable than PlayStation, approaching the new handheld as an individual and dwelling on neither its illustrious big brother nor the technological inheritance that, in the majority of cases, has made copycats of its launch titles. Its interface screams Amiga, its design favours *Marble Madness* over *Monkey Ball* and its physics are entirely cutting-edge. On any format this would be an enigma, but as an early PSP title it doubles as a persuasive suggestion of creative and technical flexibility. Not a killer app, perhaps, but a silver bullet for many a lingering doubt.

The first of six initial worlds is a rudimentary playground for its premise, that being the science and character of the mercury itself. Essentially, it's a summary of all that you've likely extrapolated from the long build-up to release. The mercury itself looks simply gorgeous, acting in no way other than how you'd expect globular metal to behave were it ferried and flung about a tilting, multi-tiered landscape. Every identifiable motion, whether it's a flight through the air or the meticulous navigation of a corner, asks a question of the game's physics to which the answer is seldom obvious. Certainly, there are basic exceptions: with sufficient impact it will splash, on a sharp edge it will divide. But the nuances that govern its precise cohesion and locomotion feel inexhaustible.

In light of what happens next, the extended tutorial is akin to a springboard that propels you headfirst into the ceiling. *Mercury* steadily becomes what the silky screenshots and artwork never fully declared – a puzzler steadfastly faithful to the old guard. It isn't a perpetual engine like *Tetris* or *Lumines*, but an architecturally immaculate theme park where every inch of real estate has been assigned a specific purpose. Its challenges, whether they involve racing to a chequered finish line, sustaining a percentage of mercury throughout a course or working it around the mechanics of a logic puzzle, are increasingly, crushingly hard. This emerges insidiously but quickly, the attainment of the second world's top scores becoming tricky, the attainment of everything beyond world four being the catalyst for an exquisite headache. Steering, merging and separating multiple blobs of variable colour through a devilish obstacle course is one thing; doing so via a single universal tilt is a brutal lesson in cause and effect.

But it's a lesson you can learn. *Mercury* exhibits a perfect hierarchy of challenge and reward, the two remaining poised throughout and ultimately growing to the point where they touch and become one. The pain becomes the pleasure because, in spite of the extraordinary degree of trial and error (practically requiring a degree in the subject), there's never a moment that feels broken or exploitative. Achieving high scores on every level (by which sequel-standard bonus stages are unlocked) is a process of discovery rather than refinement. Pursuit of the obscure shortcuts and perfect 'racing lines' required can feel like a separate game entirely and one giant bonus for the experienced elite.

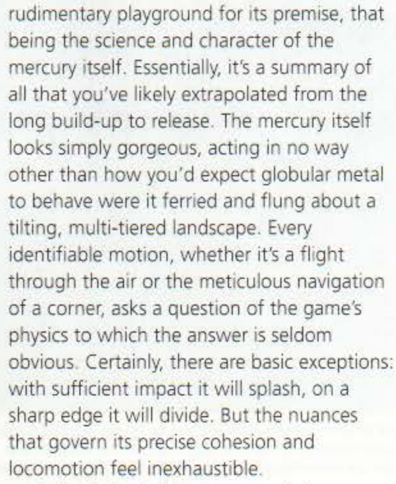
When Archer Met Sony sounded like a high-speed collision, the razor-sharp ethos of the PSP just as likely to sever his head as kiss his cheek. Whoever thought that, instead, the two would coalesce into this radiant alloy? **[8]**





All of the game's basic tables can be played in either wireless head-to-head or ghost time trials, making for some enormously nerve-wracking experiences









Environmental features, such as the Jacob's Ladder (left), can prove particularly hazardous. Get too close to one of these and watch as your mercury is zapped steadily into oblivion. Similarly, Piledrivers and Gravbenders can both smash and tear to pieces your chances of a high score

While ninja bonus stages await those who obtain every high score in a particular world, an entirely new set of levels can be accessed once the sixth world is done, each serving up a fiendishly complex puzzle

Twisted metal



Will it? Won't it? For *Super Monkey Ball Jr*, it didn't. In the case of *Mercury*, it mightn't and, right now, hasn't. It, of course, is the release of the fabled tilt sensor – a peripheral so ideally suited to this genre that the inability of everyone involved to successfully market such a device proves endlessly frustrating. In *Mercury's* case, the hardware is teasingly advanced, the playing field becoming fixed onscreen to strengthen the illusion. It's suitably responsive with adjustable sensitivity, and even adjusts the level timings to compensate for the lack of analogue nub precision. So the question resurfaces: will this novel feature again be canned by the logistics of hardware manufacture? We can only hope that the elusive UK launch provides an answer.



MIDNIGHT CLUB 3: DUB EDITION

FORMAT: PS2, XBOX PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ROCKSTAR GAMES DEVELOPER: ROCKSTAR SAN DIEGO
PREVIOUSLY IN: E142, E148

The problem with street racing games is that the streets become irrelevant. There's a start line and a finish line and, at least in theory, the idea is to get to your goal as quickly as you can, any way you can, beating your competitors in the process. But whether it's *Midnight Club*, *Driver* or *Midtown Madness*, the purity of such a simple design falls apart in practice, because it only works, only stops becoming frustrating, when checkpoint markers are placed on every street corner. Inevitably you end up with a game that's less about creative path-finding and more about following the glow.

To its credit, Rockstar San Diego has made some effort to progress the genre. There are a few shortcuts, ramps and hidden routes to be found for the intrepid, but in the heat of a race it does not pay to go off on an exploratory excursion when hitting each checkpoint suffices. For such a bombastic-looking and sounding game the racing is conservative; take a wrong turn, or risk trying out a side street, and your race can be practically over. Although you can use free-roam mode to scope out alternate routes once you've learned a race's path, it's an unrewarding and laborious process. Be cautious, stick to the designated route and you'll be successful. It's a feeling reinforced by the randomness of traffic flows, too, with the ever-present prospect of an unaccountable – and often ruinous – collision en route to the finish line. Outrageous special powers are provided to aid players as they weave and skid at high speed, but they're not enough to completely offset this issue.

While *DUB Edition* is a visual improvement from the previous games, the streets are still awash with a combination of tacky fluorescent and mean greys. The graphics engine is robust but – perhaps because the cities are closely modelled on real-world locales – there's little elevation, contrast or downright beauty to admire. It always feels like you're driving through the world's largest red-light district.

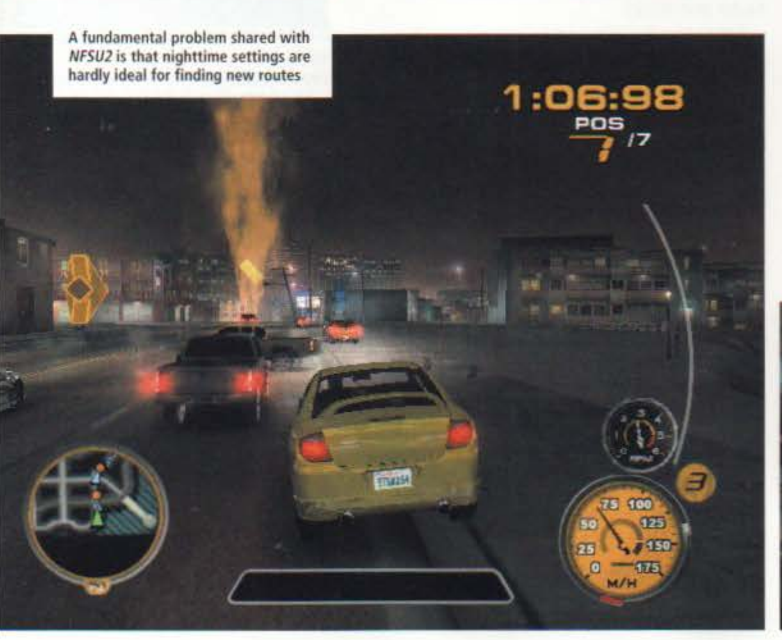
Vehicle handling suits the spirit of the game perfectly, though, and a title that encourages you to flip up on to two wheels is never going to punish you severely for braking too late into a corner. Upgrading vehicles can improve traction and steering control, but there's little sensitivity in a game that allows you to use walls as braking aids.

There's no question that *DUB Edition* can be pleasurable, especially in the multiplayer games, but the Career mode too often feels like graft. There are tournaments, one-off street races and 'special' events, but each individual race feels much the same as the last. Although it's superior to *Need For Speed Underground 2*, offering a far wider and wilder arena for street racing, it just isn't as trim and supercharged as it could be. **[6]**

Boyz under the hood



The relationship with DUB magazine was meant to bring glamour and respec' to the game, but beyond a few branded wheel trims there's little to get excited about. If you're looking for an edgy game then go elsewhere, as there are few references to hard-hitting contemporary themes. The game's lack of polish also extends to the garage, where choosing parts through endless menus is clunky and you must wait several seconds as cars load. Regardless, this'll probably sell as fast as an Escalade in a San Diego forecourt.



A fundamental problem shared with *NFSU2* is that nighttime settings are hardly ideal for finding new routes





Bikes include Harleys and Cheviots, and while they're nippier to control, one smash means your rider is catapulted over the handlebars



All vehicles are fully licensed, and the game contains damage, but it's disappointing that bashes are merely cosmetic and you are never financially penalised for scraping the paintwork

Align your vehicle behind a competitor and a slipstream meter will charge. When it's full and turned red you can trigger a powerful boost, making the world a blurry haze







ELECTROPLANKTON

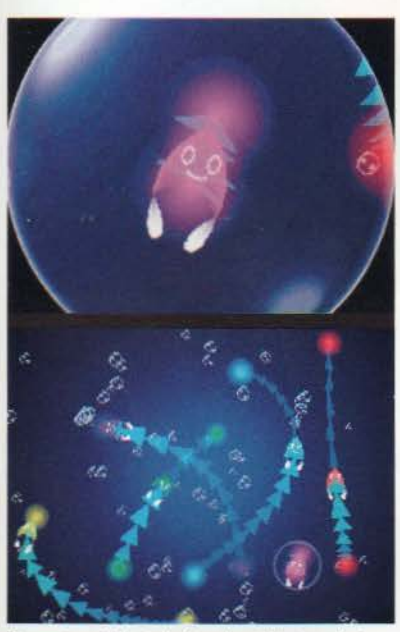
FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥4,800 (£25)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN) PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: TOSHIO IWAI/INDIESZERO PREVIOUSLY IN: E149

It's most helpful, in trying to quantify and qualify just what *Electroplankton* is, to start with what it isn't. Like most of Toshio Iwai's commercial works, though delivered and expressed through the same inputs and hardware, *Electroplankton* is not a game. It has rules, but no goals. It rewards, but not in gaming's classical sense of predefined secrets, unlockables and galleries of ephemera.

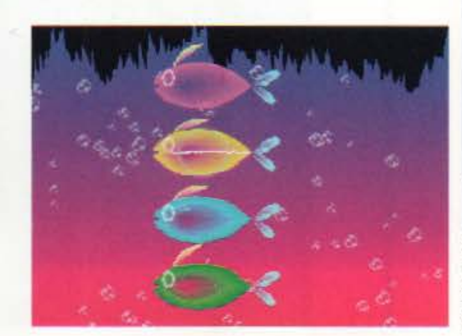
Similarly, though music is its medium (or one of the multi-, anyway), *Electroplankton* is not an instrument, at least not in the way that games have served as instruments before. Unlike the myriad trackers, loopers and remixers that comprise the musical genre – which bend to the command and skill of the user, and can be edited, honed, and micromanaged to the microsecond – the plankton themselves are creatures with a mind of their own. They eagerly await your interaction, and can be coaxed into executing truly hypnotic and entrancing compositions, but, as any director wary of working with animals and children can attest, there's an element of imprecision and impermanence to every performance, and inevitably at the exact moment when you've stumbled across the perfect sound, the plankton tire, wander away, or burn themselves away to extinction.

Electroplankton is an experience, borne of art exhibitions as it is, and is meant to be approached as such. Though there are few who can deny its inescapably captivating initial charms, it's all too easy – and not entirely without credence – for the sceptical to make a cursory run through its ten interactions in the better part of an hour, snap shut the DS, declare they've seen all there is to see, and casually dismiss it as nothing more than a premium-priced piece of niche. But to its credit, it never claims to be more than it is: equal parts commercial artwork, historical document of the artist's accomplishments, toy (in no pejorative sense), and tool for interacting with light and sound in a wholly unique way. In that sense and those terms it's next to impossible to find fault with the title.

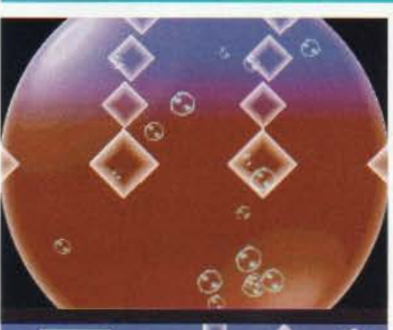
Iwai stands somewhere midway between mad media scientist and microscopic marine flea-circus ringleader – he's trained his creatures in the ways of sound and music, and has given them to the public at large to do with as they see fit. Ultimately, that means that this stands as software that will give back to the user as much as they are willing to put in. Without goals, with nothing there to 'win', *Electroplankton* is its own reward. **[8]**



It's easy to put *Electroplankton* down after ten minutes, convinced you've seen all the diversions it has to offer. Nearly all the plankton bear more careful study. These follow the lines you draw, matching pitch to shape, but their speed is governed by how fast you drew the line

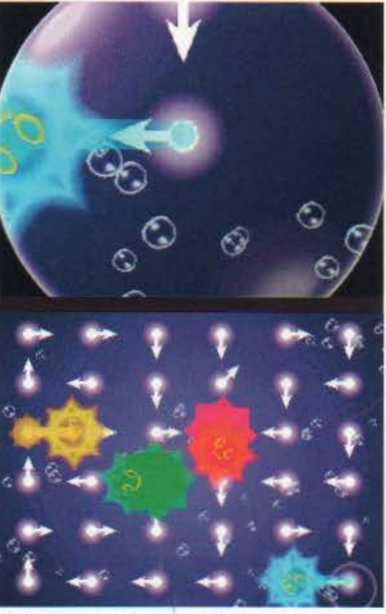


It's easy to get so absorbed in *Electroplankton* that you forget how social a machine the DS is. Find someone else with a copy of the software, and the possibilities explode, as Iwai himself demonstrated at a recent *Electroplankton* concert, sampling one DS into another and looping the results





Beatnes offers the easiest thrill, accessible even to the most uncreative player. A backdrop of familiar Nintendo tunes lets you drop sound effects and notes over the top



Musicians may not be new to the idea that music is maths in motion, but some levels make it transparently clear. These plankton follow paths you create by setting the direction of the arrows, each at different speeds, creating scales and arpeggios with geometric precision

Warping the plank



While strumming and drumming away at the screen in an endless self-absorbed musical doodle is *Electroplankton*'s main form of interaction, there's more on offer for anyone willing to tinkle with the DS's own ivories. The D-pad can be used to lower and raise the tempo of any composition, turning a fine, considered piece of harmonising into a stressful castrated sped-up comedy garble and back again. Most plankton have secondary and tertiary configurations, too, activated with the Select button. Beatnes, for example, has its base tune cycled between a number of classic Nintendo ditties, while Lumiloop's instrumentation switches from warm ambient strings to an eerie selection of organ pipes.



TONY HAWK'S UNDERGROUND 2: REMIX

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: $50 (£26) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION DEVELOPER: SHABA GAMES



This, then, is one of the refreshingly few times that PSP owners have been faced with a franchise that's cynically similar to its established, bigger-brother PS2 relation. It's a conversion that, while having not undergone the thoughtful shrink-ray that zapped both *Twisted Metal* and *Wipeout Pure*, is nonetheless an impressive one. This is *THUG 2* transferred almost identically, rail for rail and line for line, but with four new levels and a slightly fudged control system.

Those who've come to rely instinctively on using analogue sticks for steering or shoulder/trigger buttons for mid-air spins will be least at ease with this downsized control setup; the D-pad will have to suffice for those actions now, with the PSP's stick relegated to activating Focus mode via a quick flick. When moving on foot, the pad proves too skittish to be of any use, but the analogue stick steps in to take over your skater's movement. It's an awkward compromise, but is far from ruinous.



Having the spine transfer option on just one button (the right shoulder) feels like a treat compared to the typical setup of *Remix*'s console brethren, preventing any unnecessary spin in mid-air while jumping from pipe to pipe

While levels have been replicated faithfully, and the control is as vacuum-tight as is needed, there's some slickness missing. The console versions of *THUG* may not look as splendid as modern-day standards dictate, but they're smooth enough to allow for nosebleed combo lines and hyperactive trick linking across the environment. *THUG 2 Remix* doesn't cope as well under these hardcore pressures, as visuals begin to blur at high speeds, forcing reliance on muscle memory more than realtime improvisation.

These points, however, are the kind of foibles that lodge most irritatingly in the craw of seasoned *THPS* trick-jockeys. Experienced from a fresher's perspective, *THUG 2 Remix* stands straight and tall, offering the series' trademark open-ended combo blitzing in the form of a solid repackaging, albeit one that's more a testament to the PSP's potential rather than a true exploitation of it. **[7]**



Shaba Games – the studio responsible for the imaginative but unsung *Wakeboarding Unleashed* – has been given a chance to add its own character to *THUG2*'s washed-out bulk with four new levels. While these stages have a more technical slant, they're still hamstrung by the persisting urban theme that made *THUG 2*'s environments feel all too similar



TWISTED METAL: HEAD ON

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: $40 (£21)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: INCOGNITO

The latest *Twisted Metal* is an interesting clash of old and new, albeit one that fails to resolve itself as naturally as, say, *Wipeout Pure*. The familiar breed of trailer-park gumballers, the overall presentation and, indeed, the premise of the game itself seem somewhat outmoded, but thankfully this does little to undermine the solidity of play.

Head On's personality is so attuned to the showpiece functionalities of the PSP that it's as much a diagnostic tool as a dynamite brawl. Sony's handheld upholds its entrenched pyrotechnic values to the letter, weapons spiralling into graceful trajectories of smoke and belches of flame and wreckage. Happily, the series' sky-blackening derbies feel as accessible via the analogue nub and portable widescreen as they have ever been, the game's broader field of vision often proving its most effective weapon of all.

But the gratifying multiplayer, with colossal, complex maps and capable network code, comes at a price. Whatever time constraints were placed upon Incognito to have the game ready for launch, they've fuelled the development of this one mode and left little in the tank for anything else. The singleplayer campaign, in spite of its bonus stages and two enormously loud bosses, amounts to little more than practice for live deathmatches that many PSP owners will never have the opportunity to enjoy. More worrying than the limited AI of the bots (less of an issue in one-on-ones) is the game-crippling bug also arising in the retail code we tested that regularly grants you infinite energy.

For ad-hoc and internet players, however, *Twisted Metal* has once again surfaced at the opportune moment when it'll be appreciated the most. Like *Black Online*, it represents a sublimely efficient means by which to enjoy competitive multiplayer on an all-new platform, doing so amid a satisfying shower of sparks. **[6]**



In true *Twisted Metal* style, it contains little that doesn't shine, crackle, glow or explode at the earliest opportunity







JUICED

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: JUICE GAMES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E133, E138, E142

From Juice Games' perspective, its publisher's demise around the time of *Juiced*'s original planned release date late last year has proved more beneficial than first indications may have suggested. For one thing, new publisher THQ can assure the game more exposure than Acclaim could ever afford. But, crucially, it has allowed the developer to spend the last few months tweaking *Juiced* based on the predominantly negative feedback obtained from the original version's first batch of reviews (including our own in **E**142).

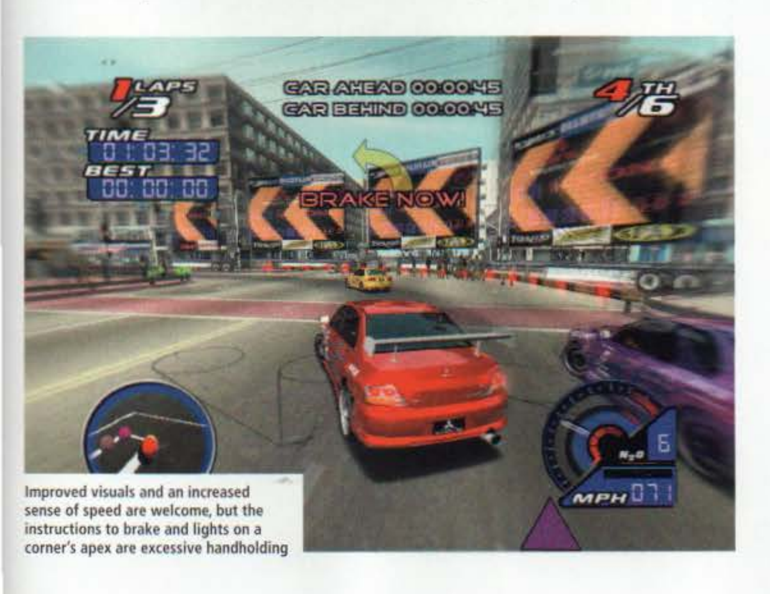
The extra time spent in the development garage is certainly noticeable. Nothing has been done to upset the game's core elements – modding everydaymobiles into bhp-spewing street racing legends within a world where respect is the highest currency – but the overall balance feels fine-tuned, resulting in a smoother and more engaging progression. More apparent is the replacement of the truly abominable intro movie with a prerendered sequence that borrows the occasional shot from John Singleton's 2 Fast 2 Furious, while in-game *Juiced* now displays an aesthetic vibrancy that propels it into Japanese arcade racer territory rather than leave it spluttering in the bland 'PC port' visualisation of its past.

The biggest tinkering has been focused on the handling department. The frustrating skittish nature of the first version has been eradicated, replaced by a predictable and easygoing alternative – alas, driving game aficionados will complain, a little too easy. Still, once they've nitroed their way into the harder races they'll find their rearview mirror fuller than they're grown accustomed to and the issue then changes drastically from how to keep ahead of the pack to how to keep out of their way. Juice Games will claim the AI has been overhauled and while it's true CPU drivers appear to adopt more realistic cornering speeds, too often they seem unable to respect your position on the road and ram you out of contention.



There's plenty of racing to be done, and the revised structure ensures you're rapidly deep into the action – but the silly AI can frustrate

Overall, then, *Juiced* re-emerges as an improved package. It certainly won't beat EA's *NFS Underground 2* sales, but it can at least pull up alongside when it comes to offering an impressively comprehensive, reasonably captivating though ultimately flawed experience. **[6]**



Improved visuals and an increased sense of speed are welcome, but the instructions to brake and lights on a corner's apex are excessive handholding

REMOTE CONTROL DANDY SF

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥6,800 (£34) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN)
PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: SANDLOT









Your robot's leg controls and body movement are all mapped on to the shoulder buttons and D-pad while the sticks handle Uni's movement. After each encounter your team is awarded money with which to improve robot parts or weapons

Gamers are used to multitasking, but this is quite something else. That *Remote Control SF* requires constant mastery of 11 of the controller's buttons is not especially remarkable – *Steel Battalion* saw to that. Rather, here players' faces are shoved against the boundaries of interface management with both a full set of controls for manoeuvring a fully functional robot soldier as well as all those needed to control its independent radio-controlling pilot, from whose eyes you view the action. Unlike Sandlot's *Tetsujin 28go*, which denied simultaneous commander and robot handling, here you really are playing two games at once – one in firstperson, another in thirdperson; it's postmodern roleplay personified.

Each battle sees pint-sized, yellow-suited robot commander Uni Kawara, and one of his ever-expanding range of robots, visit a destructible environment where you must face either single or multiple opponents. Should Uni stray too far from his RC robot then the radio waves won't reach, so finding a nearby safe spot with enough perspective to be able to direct your robot intelligently and effectively is imperative. This characterisation of the camera makes it possible to perch on the robot's head high in the clouds or to take refuge on a nearby rooftop. With the new control system it's even possible to dodge your way through the monstrous machines' legs as you control the battle above your head.

Taking the robot through the mandatory and ongoing training levels is like learning to ride a bicycle and, once block and counter moves are added to the equation, the whole exercise feels like a vast interactive physics lesson. Getting your robot to land an uppercut initially seems akin to mastering some great martial secret, but after a few encounters you soon settle into the rhythm of dual control and clumsily driving your robot into demolishing the three-storey housing you're simultaneously boosting Uni on to becomes a humorous blip rather than an inevitable misjudgement. Level design is varied, but it's hard to deny that most arenas are designed to simply slow down the progress of both robots before their inevitable face-off.

Successful videogame creation is often a case of refining 30 seconds of gameplay and then stretching them out to fill the whole game. Sandlot's half-minute pitch is as niche as it is inventive. But what could have been an enormously convoluted exercise largely flows with unexpected ease, coming together to represent everything wonderful about the short, sharp, inventive side of Japanese gaming. **[7]**


VAGRANT STORY
PlayStation

TIME EXTEND

VAGRANT STORY

FORMAT: **PS1**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **2000**

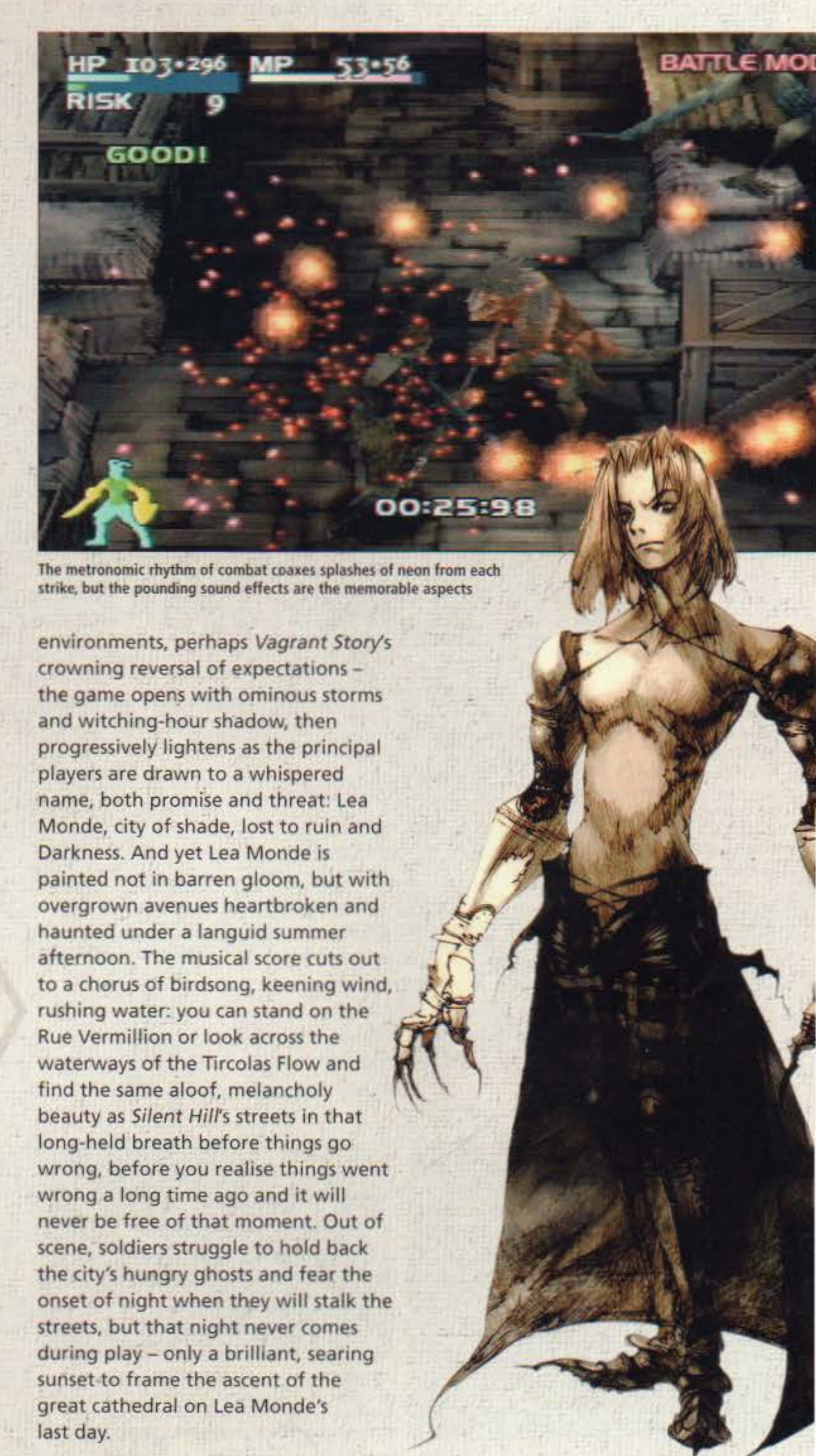
A swansong for the PlayStation and a fairytale of what console RPGs might have been, Square's most un-Square epic is anything but transient

V*agrant Story* is a story told on its own terms from that obsessively detailed cover artwork down. A cropped version of character designer Akihiko Yoshida's image graced every territory's release instead of a safer, shelf-friendlier, but ill-fitting render – on that note, the opening FMV feels like both a weary concession by the designers and a beautiful, vacuous shrug of the shoulders from the *Final Fantasy VIII* cinematic team, asked to sell a dungeon-crawl-as-Shakespearean-tragedy in 20 seconds or less. Flashy, jump-cut and typically Square, it sits uncomfortably in a title that's atypical in almost every way. So atypical that even the cover's moody watercolours are misleading: hero Ashley Riot and companion Callo Merlose are barely united for longer than the in-game introduction sequences. (That's sequences – one to follow a press of the Start button, the other two to play out if you don't press it, as it would be too straightforward to thread the political and personal cat's cradle of the plotline from just one viewpoint.) If it hints at sexual tension, the closest any character gets to true intimacy is in the game's final chapter of deaths and farewells – in Ashley's case, comforting the ravaged body of the man he has spent the game pursuing, scarecrow-blonde fugitive Sydney Losstarot, after his immortality has been bloodily stripped from his back.

Strange romances and shifting allegiances are common enough in RPG plotlines, as are heroes forced to confront their traumatic pasts, but *Vagrant Story*'s characters are written and drawn with a confidence that moves them beyond pantomime into arrestingly staged theatre. It's a more sober production than those resulting from Kojima's adoration of cinema, yet not po-faced enough to resist naming its lead antagonist Romeo Guildenstern and a triple-crossing conspirator Rosencrantz. Where the environments embrace period detail, Yoshida's character and costume design subvert it for medieval chic and brazenly bare flesh – infamously so in the case of Ashley's practically buttock-baring slit trousers, or how little of Sydney's frame is left to the imagination. *Vagrant Story*'s leads brought catwalk sex appeal to a genre too eager to settle for stereotype and functionality: sporting armour as fashion statements, unrepentant anachronisms like razorblade-fingered gauntlets, golden lip rings or stocking-and-suspender greaves and, most impressively, managing to retain much of their haughty allure even when transferred to the PlayStation's shivering polygons.

The character models are the pinnacle of the last days of PS1, but it's the stage direction that flatters their imperfections and makes even the most slow-burning of scenes electric. Never settling for talking heads, both camera and actors are constantly restless, the former finding new angles with seductively gentle pans or violent lurches as the action demands; the latter swaggering, preening, circling each other's personal spaces with the wary contemplation of predatory animals. What's still impressive is the sense that they have chemistry, portraying wordless communication and overwrought monologue alike with poise and performance, not the awkward shuffling on the spot and rigid, semaphore emoting of so many in-game productions. And they're framed superbly by their environments, perhaps *Vagrant Story*'s crowning reversal of expectations – the game opens with ominous storms and witching-hour shadow, then progressively lightens as the principal players are drawn to a whispered name, both promise and threat: Lea Monde, city of shade, lost to ruin and Darkness. And yet Lea Monde is painted not in barren gloom, but with overgrown avenues heartbroken and haunted under a languid summer afternoon. The musical score cuts out to a chorus of birdsong, keening wind, rushing water: you can stand on the Rue Vermillion or look across the waterways of the Tircolas Flow and find the same aloof, melancholy beauty as *Silent Hill*'s streets in that long-held breath before things go wrong, before you realise things went wrong a long time ago and it will never be free of that moment. Out of scene, soldiers struggle to hold back the city's hungry ghosts and fear the onset of night when they will stalk the streets, but that night never comes during play – only a brilliant, searing sunset to frame the ascent of the great cathedral on Lea Monde's last day.

Never settling for talking heads, both camera and actors are constantly restless, the former finding new angles with seductively graceful pans or violent lurches as the action demands



The metronomic rhythm of combat coaxes splashes of neon from each strike, but the pounding sound effects are the memorable aspects



FOUND IN TRANSLATION

Vagrant Story's English script is certainly the best Square localisation effort and arguably one of the best from any publisher to date. The localisation team appears to have been given the same free rein to improvise as the developers, having rewritten the script in the spirit of the period, and in the spirit of the game itself, instead of dryly transcribing it word for word. Some of the language's power may come from it being written on screen rather than risking a voice cast's interpretations – conversations are all conducted in wiry, expressive speech balloons – but it's impressive enough that they meet the challenge of expressing the characters' multilayered personalities and shifting moods in text alone. Attention to detail doesn't end at the dialogue, with items and enemies tweaked to play off legendary cues, medieval lore, and the game's own unique voice.

Despite the fearsome solidity of *Vagrant Story*'s atmosphere, it never shies away from admitting it's a videogame. It sports enough screen furniture to comfortably entertain friends, with a UI overlay as contrastingly modern as its surroundings are historical – the wireframe globe that blooms to indicate the range of an attack as fondly remembered by players as any cinematic sequence. While the script finds characters justifying the existence of moving platforms and walking dead, the block puzzle sections and their optional 'Evolve Or Die!' timed completion challenges (not to be taken literally, as failure only earns a disdainful rank on the evolutionary scale) go cheerfully, thankfully, unexplained. Defeat a boss and a congratulatory screen tallies your increasingly pinball machine-like score, and awards a chance to slightly upgrade Ashley's statistics by stopping a roulette wheel – with attendant drum roll – of upgrades. Most markedly, combat itself, though



It's possible to only make brief visits to the workshops (above) to repair weapons, but many players toiled in them for hours fashioning the perfect arms. Sadly, it's all performed through menus, not interacting with the tools



stage dressings are first pulled aside to hint at the depths of mechanic beneath – usually at a boss encounter where the player discovers their chosen weapon fails to even register a chink in their foe's armour – many considered it a betrayal, that they had been lured unwittingly into the ghetto of hardcore statistics-matching by the spectacular production design. And to some degree, they had been: the game was developed as a concept album for Yasumi Matsuno's *Final Fantasy Tactics* and *Ogre Battle* team, a jam session of unbridled strategy and extravagant aesthetic designed to be all things to some gamers. If

Many considered they had been lured unwittingly into the ghetto of hardcore statistics-matching by the production design. And to some degree, they had been

moving in stop-and-think-motion compared to many action-RPGs before and since, hinges on measured button combos and heartbeat-accurate timing, owing as much to rhythm-action as tactical strategy. That's not to downplay how seriously the game takes its combat system, though, invariably the aspect that accounts for the chasmic differences of opinion over the title. When its

navigating the equipment trees was as straightforward as navigating the gameworld, if the hard numbers could have been injected with the playful mechanics present elsewhere, if the battle system wasn't so indifferent to a first-time player's struggles, *Vagrant Story* might have made more friends – but it's a self-sacrifice Matsuno seemed not so much resigned to as expectant of.

Those who were on the positive side of that divided reception learned to appreciate that Ashley was a one-man army and they were that army's quartermaster, responsible for ensuring his selection of weapons was wide enough to exploit any weakness: playing not just the hero in battle, but his squire outside of it. As it's the weapons and armour themselves that gain experience through combat, the artificially short lifespan of traditional RPG equipment – no





Enemies are as carefully, patiently detailed as the main characters, and often just as memorable: the harpies that strut through the gaslit alleys of the Undercity (left) are a ghoulishly inspired highlight



The body is but a vessel for the soul, A puppet which bends to the soul's tyranny.

matter how grand an item, it's only useful until you find a +1 version of it – doesn't apply. Weapons are cherished, made legendary, at worst broken down into their separate components and reforged with stronger materials. As one of surprisingly few RPGs to allow you to name your armaments, you're encouraged to build a personal myth of dragonscale-piercing lances and hallowed greatswords alongside Ashley's preordained story. Actually fielding them in battle is a slightly more inglorious procedure, as switching weapons goes ignored by the shortcut menu accessing the four schools of magic, special attacks and combos, instead requiring constant inventory-swapping. Combined with the lengthy menu to-and-froing to repair and rework weapons in Lea Monde's remote workshops, the dedicated player would spend more time elbow-deep in interfaces than exercising their trigger fingers. Others were driven to simply chaining enough attacks for the combination bonuses to stack up damage that their weapon couldn't otherwise deliver, allowing Ashley to triumph over most foes using only his original sword, Fandango – though such a protracted process should require renaming that blade Track And Field.

There's a theme of overripeness in *Vagrant Story*'s visuals: its dungeons more memorial ruin than charnel house, and Ashley's repressed memories play out on an idyllic summer field, not a battlefield

The breadth of combat possibilities means that retooling Ashley before each fight is almost comparable to swapping party members in and out in a traditional console RPG, and yet the other most prominent criticism of *Vagrant Story* alongside its complexity is its isolationism. For nearly the entirety of



GLAMOUR CARTOGRAPHY

Even checking *Vagrant Story*'s 3D map is a perverse pleasure, given that every area has a unique and often evocative name – the Blackmarket of Wines, the Hall of Sworn Revenge, the Crumbling Market, the Dark Coast. As with the script, most have been rewritten for impact rather than parroting the original Japanese, occasionally clouding the stories some sections tell of Lea Monde's history, but largely improving on them with wit and thought. And, occasionally, a sly wink – a Kilroy Was Here in the mineshafts beneath the city walls, or if finding a clearing in the Snowfly Forest named The Hollow Hills isn't necessarily a nod to post-punk miserablists Bauhaus, the following section being The Flat Fields leaves little room for doubt.





Characters draw sparks off each other as they clash swords, tongues and wills throughout the course of the storyline: the effect is beguiling and believable

gameplay, Ashley is alone, with comfort in numbers a luxury only the other characters enjoy, and boss encounters often feeling less fleeting than the plot encounters (strangely, narrative cut-scenes can be skipped, but boss entrances must be endured). It seems a needless abstraction that you must confirm Ashley as the target of spells and item effects, until a chance encounter finds Sydney fighting at his side. Oddly, it's not a sign of things to come: the partner dynamic is confined to that single fight, and after that moment even narrative encounters become more spaced out, though no less packed with exposition. There's the slight sensation that the game's oracle has unexpectedly fallen silent, and while a teleport system is introduced to allow you to revisit old locations and plumb some of their secrets for items, none trigger another bout of foreshadowing or memory. It's a forgettable lapse given that the narrative returns with renewed intensity in the final hours (giving even latecoming incidental characters affectingly poignant send-offs) but one explained by Matsuno in a post-release interview: nearly half of *Vagrant Story*, including the introduction of companions, was cut to meet schedule and the PS1's limitations.

It's hard to resist imagining what could have been – gameplay questions of how supporting characters would have affected the game, story questions of where characters would be reunited, or where the seeds were planted for others to be pulled apart. Yet the game doesn't feel unfinished, isn't tangibly lacking in resolution or impact or length, and perhaps it's best to appreciate what has been achieved to the fullest of the team's application, if not their ambition. There's no extended edition, no unlockable epilogue, just the same double-edged closure as is offered to





Impressive enough in the game's standard perspective (left), environments can also be viewed from firstperson (above), adding an entirely new level of richness and solidity

Ashley over the conflicting stories of his past: "What difference does it make? Whether you lost a wife and child or killed an innocent family, you cannot bring back the dead." Anyway, the game says, people die: now, play through again for 100 per cent map completion, to descend to the heart of the now-unlocked Iron Maiden high-level dungeon, to forge Damascus and Dread equipment from the spoils of Last Crusaders – but not for another moment of storyline. Where the first playthrough is pure videogame storytelling, the extra content is pure videogame, perhaps the proof of the accusation that the game's balance between drama and min-maxing exercise is too heavily towards the latter for it to be considered a work of art. To that, fans will retort that precious few games can command attention through all their cut-scenes all over again on repeat plays.

Though the finale leaves the story open as wide as the introduction's camera sweep finds the sky at dawn, there will never be a sequel – really, there *could* never be a sequel

As with many of the titles that stay in the mind long after every moment has been exhausted, all the mistakes that were included and all the 'if only's that were not are part of the experience: *Vagrant Story* is a glorious, impossible mess. Though the finale leaves the story open as wide as the introduction's camera sweep finds the sky at dawn, there will never be a sequel – really, there *could* never be a sequel, only the hope that more developers will take the same chances, and that there will be players to accept the strange hand those chances deal.



A combination of the PS1's best smoke-and-mirrors and peerless artistic direction ensures that the first sight of cursed, melancholy Lea Monde will still prickle the arms with goosebumps as effectively as any Emotion Engine







THE MAKING OF...
ALONE IN THE DARK

The architect of survival horror shone candlelight on gaming's third dimension, but not without burning its creator's fingers

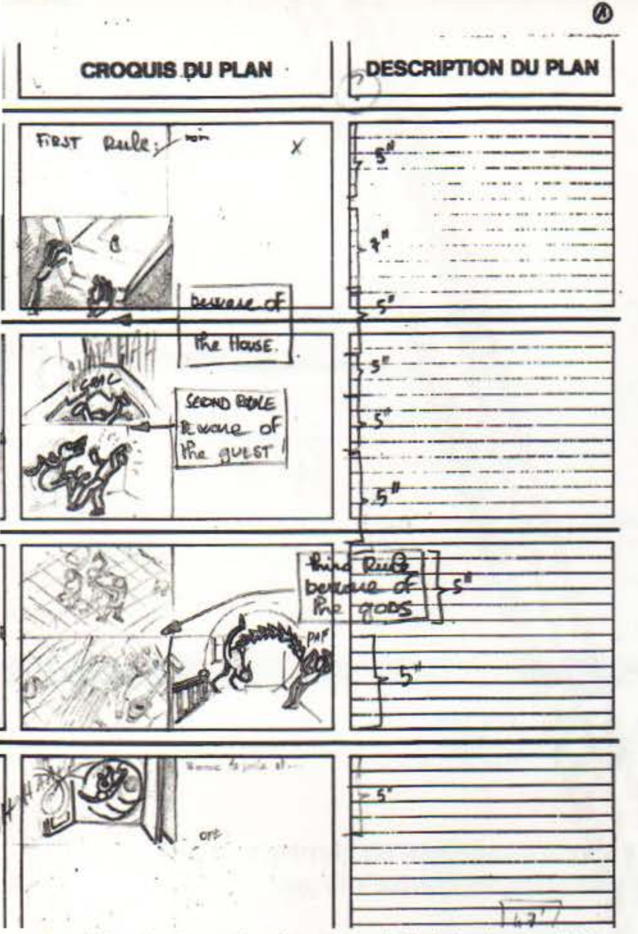
ORIGINAL FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **INFOGRAMES** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** ORIGIN: **FRANCE** RELEASE: **1992**

Alone In The Dark was made at the point in gaming history where 3D truly came alive, flat-shaded polys giving way to textures, and requiring the efforts of increasing team sizes to become real. Production staff numbers grew from one or two people to almost ten, each with their own competencies. Structure became key, especially with real businessmen as managers: people who wanted to make money, people able to provide the creators with a relevant working framework. Not too strict a framework, however, as the story of *Alone In The Dark* reveals.

As the '80s drew to a close, **Frédérick Raynal**, an extremely gifted, game-obsessed, young programmer, was hired by Infogrames upon their discovery of *Popcorn*, a game he coded early in his career. Joining a studio with a workforce of only 20, Raynal juggled various responsibilities including the creation of ports and graphic libraries, none of which happened to suit his aspirations. A childhood inventor, the only constraints he accepted were those of the machines he worked with. Fortuitously, the company's management of human resources would allow him the time to pursue more personal research, his bosses looking on with both kindness and contempt. They may not have empathised with his activities, but so long as the official boxes were being ticked, they'd abide.

Alone In The Dark was made at the point in gaming history where 3D truly came alive, flat-shaded polys giving way to textures

In 1989, Raynal was asked to port Christophe de Dinechin's



Raynal claims that *Alone In The Dark* was designed by his instinct, but the relatively large production team still required guidance. It came in the form of storyboards

The 3D models look primitive by today's standards, but their movement – in accordance with the power of the PC at your disposal – gave them a life that was, in '92, bewitching





ST game *Alpha Waves* (aka *Continuum*) to the PC. While becoming versed with its 3D technology, his imagination sparked at its possibilities in terms of immersion. "This was the time," he reflects, "when I started thinking about animated characters that could move in scenes that would look like something." In 1990, he began programming a tool for the creation and animation of 3D characters. At the same time, with the help of trainee Frank De Girolami, he devised a tool by which he could place a camera inside a scene, generate that scene in wireframe and acquire from it a bitmap image. From there, a graphic designer would have to 'colour by hand' the wireframe to simulate a 3D environment. A year later, Infogrames' CEO Bruno Bonnell proposed the idea of an inexpensive game where the player could employ three matches to gain a snapshot of their otherwise dark environment. In this, Raynal saw a potential vehicle for some prototypical ideas of his own.

Dubbed *In The Dark*, the game's conceptual foundation was the deprivation of light, the player advancing throughout with the aid of burning matches. Raynal, having dreamed of a fear-based game for a long time, jumped at the idea. "In the '80s," he reveals, "my dad had a video club and I would watch many movies. I loved horror movies, especially Dawn Of The Dead by George Romero, where the heroes are trapped in a supermarket attacked by zombies. Since then, I knew I would create a zombie game: some day, when technology would allow it."

Raynal interpreted the project somewhat differently to its originators, but was nonetheless granted his wish to lead it. Infogrames' artistic director Didier Chanfray immediately understood the vision he was pursuing. His first sketches – white chalk on black Canson paper – were so good that they inspired an internal contest organised among the company's graphic artists, whereby the 2D artwork had to be extrapolated into a pseudo-3D environment. A winner emerged in the guise of Ya'l Barroz who, as set decorator, would duly join Raynal (director and coder) and Chanfray (modeller and character animator) as part of *Alone In The Dark*'s core team. The room Barroz modelled became the first technical demo seen by the Infogrames directors, and they were stunned.

The official green light from Infogrames came in the autumn of 1991. A first-time writer would help Raynal build the house in accordance with the experience he wanted players to endure. Again, his eye was fixed on exactly what he wanted. "A 1920s manor," he recalls. "I wanted a big enough house, where you would start in the attic so that you could completely explore it before finding the way out. The turn of the century allowed for weapons while avoiding the modern commodities that were too difficult to properly handle: electricity, for instance, would have caused atmosphere and consistency problems." By Christmas, the team had created the opening of Raynal's grim endeavour – a 'first playable' iteration of the experience that gave an early indication of the quality of the finished game.

As production began the following year, the team grew to six with the arrival of composer Philippe Vachey, writer Hubert Chardot and De Girolami (who would later become project lead on *Alone In The Dark 2*). During three consecutive afternoons, Raynal outlined to his team the game's roadmap, defining the assets to be created: 170 images for 170 different cameras along with the monsters, objects, triggered events, player actions,



Didier Chanfray's sketch work (above) may have been simplistic, but with the point of t game embedded in the concept of light illuminating darkness, it was perfect material



RULE NUMBER ONE:
BEWARE OF THE HOUSE!

RULE NUMBER TWO:
BEWARE OF UNWANTED GUESTS!

RULE NUMBER THREE:
BEWARE OF THE GODS!

AND LAST BUT BY NO MEANS LEAST:
BEWARE OF THE DARK! YOU'VE

YOU, EDWARD CARNBY, HAVE GOT MANY WAYS TO FIGHT,
BUT ONLY ONE CHANCE TO WIN.
DEFEAT THEM or DIE! ..... DIE!

NOW, YOU HAVE TO FACE THE ULTIMATE CHALLENGE.

PRAY FOR GOOD LUCK,
FOR YOU'RE ALONE...
ALONE IN THE DARK!

Cooking up the intro (above) was clearly a source of entertainment for Raynal. It's interesting that gaming's language hasn't changed much in the 13 years since





background story and narrative text they'd convey. By the meeting's conclusion, everyone would know their precise itinerary for the following six months.

Raynal, at this juncture, was 100 per cent sure of his design choices, but unsure as to the reasons behind them, designing the whole game by instinct. In retrospect, he explains: "A game is 80 per cent movement. This is where you want the player to be scared, when doing these simple things. In *Alone*, when he opens his first door, there's a monster right behind it and he immediately dies. When he walks down his first corridor, the floorboards collapse and he kills himself. From that moment, he will be scared all the time. The music also helps. I wanted a dynamic score, with a specific theme for the arrival of each monster. Philippe had the idea to play it a few more times than were necessary. In the end, when playing *Alone*, you were often scared without reason."

"This is where you want the player to be scared... In the end, when playing Alone, you were often scared without reason"

Months later, the game obtained the Call Of Cthulhu licence Bonnell had bought from Chaosium Games. HP Lovecraft's bestiary replaced every zombie but for the few that Raynal insisted on keeping for sentimental reasons. Ultimately, the game wouldn't be released under the Cthulhu banner, Chaosium deeming it too simple to honour the complex rules of the pen-and-paper game. But during the first half of 1992, this consideration became increasingly minor, soon to be left behind. The team knew they were creating something special and a sense of euphoria filled their office. They returned from the spring ECTS and the Las Vegas CES full of energy, galvanized by the enthusiasm of both journalists and buyers.





Come the summer, however, times became decidedly harder. Raynal and Barroz had fallen in love, Barroz becoming pregnant and now being close to giving birth. Raynal recalls the month of August when tension would accompany the telephone's every ring: "It was either a bug," he says, "or the hospital." In September, after a year of complete freedom, an Infogrames manager visited with the intent of seeing the game's credits. After 'Game created by', he asked that 'Frédérick Raynal' be replaced by 'Infogrames'. Raynal did as he was asked, the intense bug-testing of the previous couple of months having damaged his confidence. All he saw in the game at this point in time were flaws that he was convinced would be noticed by gamers, and what happened next didn't help. Infogrames issued instructions for *Alone In The Dark 2*: a sequel that was bound to sell. 'Keep the same engine', went the directive, 'and just come up with a new story'.

Raynal says that he felt like a prisoner. For the sequel, he wanted 3D sets and lights and a raft of other improvements, but there was no arguing with instructions. In November 1992, *Alone In The Dark* was released for PC, meeting with huge success. Infogrames was no doubt delighted with its commercial achievements, but Raynal was left feeling that the company had denied him the recognition – both formal and financial – which he deserved for creating the game which founded the series. As a consequence, he, along with the rest of his team, left the company almost immediately.

The end of *Alone In The Dark*, he reveals, remains "the trauma of my life." He elaborates: "This game sold two-and-a-half million copies. It made Infogrames tens of millions of pounds and they couldn't show us some recognition for it? Only the support of the press and the gamers allowed me to get over it."

Following Infogrames, Raynal founded Adeline Software and created *Relentless*, known in the UK as *Little Big Adventure*. Recognition was not far off.

NIGHT MOVES

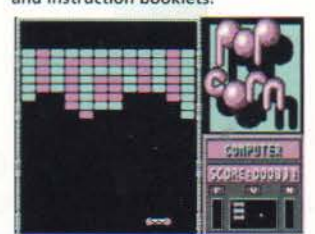
Alongside the pseudo-3D that gave *Alone In The Dark* a beauty unmatched by its competitors, Raynal takes the most pride in the game's animation system. Having created a new character, the 3D artist would define its keyframe positions and the computer, via angular interpolation, would calculate the positions in between. It required very little memory and the result was astounding, functional on any computer and improving with its power: the more powerful the machine, the more numerous the intermediate positions and the smoother the resulting animation.



Raynal's 3D animation system isn't a world away from those in use today – although the poly counts make it look quite quaint

PLEASURE BEFORE BUSINESS

Frédérick Raynal's first notable game, prior to his time at Infogrames, was *Popcorn*, a hugely popular *Breakout* clone realised by himself and Christophe Lacaze. *Popcorn* was distributed for free on the PC, Raynal wanting not to make money out of it but for it to be played by as many people as possible. In his youth, from the attic of his father's store, he created games for the ZX81 and the Spectrum, inspired by the hit arcade games he was playing at the time. Even though no one would ever see his games, each was nonetheless a finished product, with menus, sounds, music and even cover art and instruction booklets.



Codeshop
Tracking developments in development

Next year's model

New consoles should mean new ways of creating and re-using art assets, reckons Luxology, the company behind novel modelling package modo

www.luxology.com
www.sensable.com

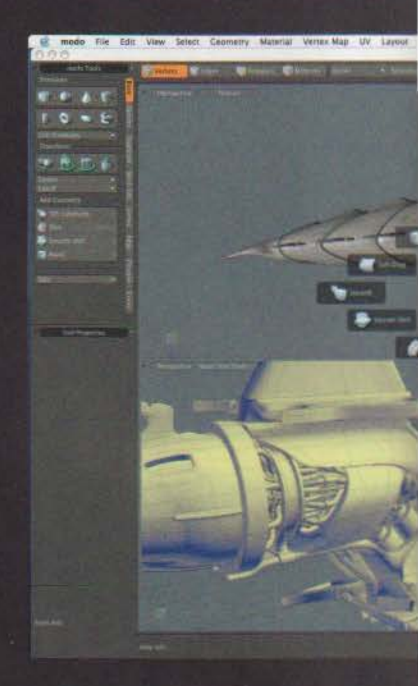
Microsoft's J Allard may feel evangelical about the High Definition Era, but it's a mark of how worried publishers are about the impact of new hardware on their development budgets that many are starting to raise the subject of game pricing. Notable in his concerns is EA CEO Larry Probst, who has sagely commented he wouldn't be surprised if the first wave of next-gen games carried a higher price point than the currently typical $50 or £40. Which, considering he's the most powerful man in the industry outside of Sony, Microsoft or Nintendo, means the first wave of next-gen games is likely to cost considerably more than $50 or £40.

The reasons are clear. With the performance of consoles jumping by an order of magnitude, the number of assets required and their resolution, particularly that of art assets, is going to skyrocket.

Autodesk's games industry manager **Michel Kripalani** reckons the transition will herald a massive shift. "The fidelity of assets will go through the roof," he says. "Models will likely be five to ten times more intricate than the last generation of games, and texture maps will be at least twice as detailed. In addition, the use of normal maps will force developers to create ultra-high-resolution files from which to create the in-game geometry."

For developers, then, the options will be either to cut back on the scale of games or increase their staff numbers. In fact, they'll probably do both and still find game budgets have doubled. It's a situation sure to open the door to novel tools and modelling techniques as developers try to become more efficient.

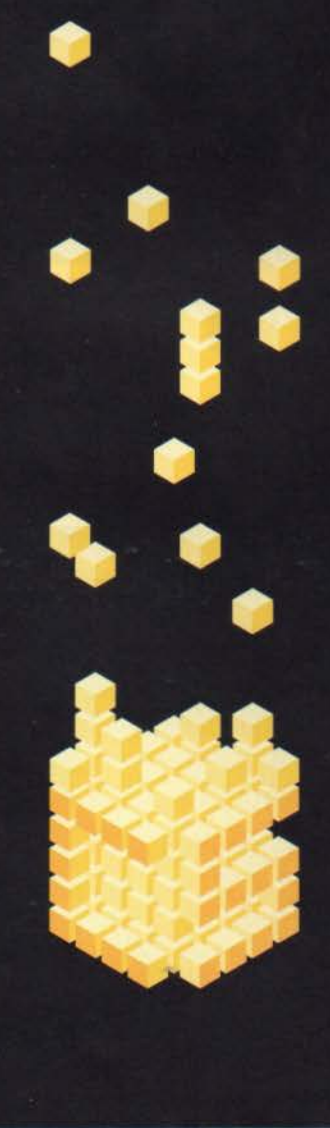
One company looking to ride this wave is Luxology. Its standalone modelling package, modo, offers a new take on the asset creation. "It's designed as a productivity tool with a particular focus on content re-use," says president and co-founder **Brad Peebler**. "From a simple economics position, if we can

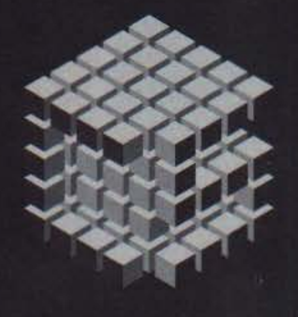


extend an artist's productivity by only 20 per cent, modo will make a profound impact on a large studio's timeline and bottom line."

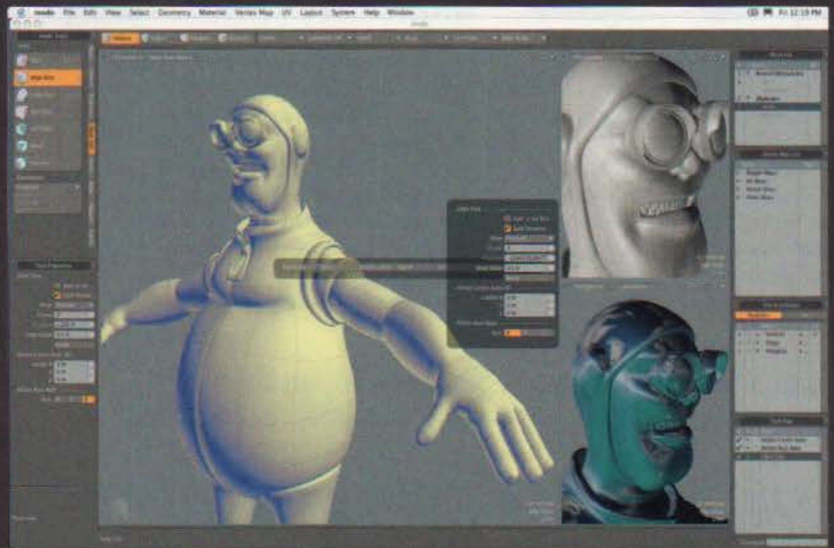
One way modo helps is by enabling artists to up-res assets by converting polygon-based models to subdivisional surfaces and then breaking up those polygons to create more detailed surfaces. In the past, such techniques have generally been shunned because the ease of rendering polygons (whether triangles or four-cornered quads) meant they have always been the videogame industry's pre-eminent modelling primitives. This is despite the advantages offered by more exotic subdivisional and curved surface techniques such as NURBS and Beziers, which are used by the movie industry to create the rounded, organic-looking models of films such as Toy Story and Shrek.

It's for this reason that their use in games has been restricted to defining the curves of track-racing games or the slopes in games such as *SSX Tricky*. The









As well as offering artists the ability to model using subdivisional surfaces while keeping their polygons, modo also features a flexible user interface, which can be easily modified, and powerful edge and mapping tools

other is that, instead of being mathematically described by the point coordinators of their corners, curved surface models are defined by curves and planes in three-dimensional space, which makes them much more complex to use.

The rub is it's this characteristic that also makes them much more efficient in terms of how much memory they use in-game. It's an important attribute considering console performance has risen much faster than the amount of RAM. This is why Sony has tried to encourage developers to use curved surfaces. Both PlayStation2 and PSP support the techniques in hardware, meaning that once such models are created they should be very fast and efficient to render. Yet such are the problems involved in changing established working practises, few if any games have used the techniques.

Peebler, however, reckons this is one area where modo offers a real advantage. "It allows the artist to work in polygons or subdivision surfaces freely," he explains. "It's also possible to make deep edits to a model, including geometry creation and removal, without damaging UV and blendshape data." This is because all data types in modo are polygons; its subdivision surfaces actually being n-gons – that is, polygons with more than four corners.

But Kripalani remains to be convinced of how the future will play out. "This generation of systems will be highly RAM limited, so alternative methods for storing geometry will have to be found," he concedes. "Still, I am not convinced it will be NURBS or subdivisional surfaces. Let's not forget, the PlayStation2 chipset was highly optimised for higher-order surfaces and developers never gravitated towards them. We might not see a shift this time either."

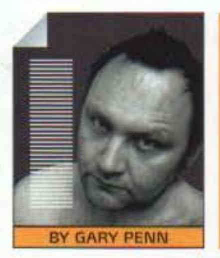


Innovative in more ways than one, SensAble's ClayTools and the Phantom Omni haptic device enables artists to sculpt models in 3DS Max rather than building them from scratch

Clay without the mess

Another company looking to take the opportunity of new modelling techniques is SensAble. Its ClayTools package is designed to shift artists away from modelling individual polygons to using virtual clay to generate subdivisional surface meshes. It operates as a plug-in for 3DS Max, and works best with the novel Phantom Omni haptic device, which is an arm-like control structure allowing artists to sculpt in three dimensions. Using this, they can interact with their models in a more organic manner, smudging, smoothing and carving into the blocks. This makes it much easier to add the sort of detail such as muscles, wrinkles and bumps which are hard to achieve using traditional modelling tools. Alternatively, ClayTools can be used to generate very high resolution models, which can be processed by the tools within 3DS Max to generate normal maps that will be used in conjunction with a much lower resolution version of the original model to provide the illusion of surface detail in-game.




BY GARY PENN

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Seriously lacking

It's been said before, but I'm going to say it again: videogames are great – for straight white boys. Anyone else in search of diversity or something a little more cerebral, something that engages on an intellectual level other than strategic play, would be wise to consider other media.

The more established forms of art and entertainment – principally words and pictures – know no bounds. Books, plays, and films (not to mention photography, painting and sculpture) explore an incredible diversity of topics ranging from love in its many guises, disability, infidelity, family, cultural diversity and critical illness to domestic abuse, incest, rape and genocide. None of these topics have been covered to any worthwhile degree in games – and are unlikely to be in the foreseeable future.

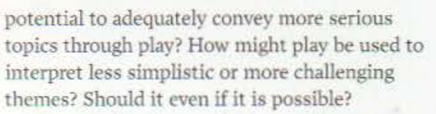
Can play and games ever be taken as seriously as their contemporaries? Is there the potential to adequately convey more serious topics through play? How might play be used to interpret less simplistic or more challenging themes? Should it even if it is possible?

Thousands of years of stage performance provided a resource for the foundation of cinema, but for play there is no such precedent. Any games that have covered serious subjects have usually done so with crass consideration (cf: Atari VCS 'classic' *Custer's Revenge*). Recent 'mature content' tends to focus on laddish exploits, principally violence and bad language.

Imagine while exploring a dramatised simulation of a city you suddenly find your virtual self on the receiving end of a gang rape, with all means of influence severely hampered, no scope to quit except through disconnecting the power supply, your toy's performance subsequently impaired... Is that moving away from player back to voyeur? Rape through roleplay? Rape as entertainment? Rape made virtually real to make players appreciate the reality of the evil that men do? Frustrating, intolerable play? The rape could be represented as part of the story, but then that's using a more traditional means of delivery.

Of course, such unsavoury subjects aren't commonly covered in any medium. Unlike more palatable pursuits such as (sigh) love... Players are often required to avenge or reunite with a lost love, and there are dating games in Japan, but it's not as if any of those experiences make a connection with or explore what it is to love, to love unrequited, to love and lose.

Take any tale that focuses on expression of the mind, on thoughts and feelings, on expressive dialogue – none of this works well in play. Play is about doing (and virtual play about doing through others). Play is actions not words. Play is performance for self-satisfaction not that of others. Even actors use audiences to amplify and channel their vanity.



> Take any tale that focuses on expression of the mind, on thoughts and feelings, on expressive dialogue – none of this works well in play

Schindler's Ark. Lolita. Lady Chatterley's Lover. Jean De Florette. Anna Karenina. Pride And Prejudice. Stories created for and conveying messages through a specific medium, some converted effectively to other media such as film or the stage. But never to play. Even if such stories were recreated in play, they wouldn't connect in the same way – on the same level, to the same depth. Games tend to be about black or white, not shades of grey – or subtle or sensitive shades of any other colour. It's hard to see how pretty much any classic novel could be 'made playable'. They aren't written with play in mind. But every year supposedly unfilmable novels are filmed, some successfully enough, so why not the seemingly unplayable?

A boy. A tiger. A lifeboat. A wide-open ocean. A challenge to survive. A challenge to make satisfying play... Creating the toyset and relevant rules is straightforward enough, but making play, the game comparable to the book, making it compelling and, most importantly, playable? How might such a limited stage work as playscape? Not as well as it does a platform for observed performance in the book or might as a play or film. The same theme – the same message requires a completely different approach to carry the same weight through play.

An appreciation of how to build and exploit virtual toys is improving but there's still so much to be understood. The interface between player and play must become invisible for a more cohesive connection, to make it more convenient to become more involved, for the involvement to become total. The fact you don't have to think about how to read makes all the difference. When you do it through a computer or console, the interface is not seamless.

Videogames are sometimes exhilarating rollercoaster rides. Sometimes they grip you so hard you lose all sense of time and space. But the fact is: play passes the time but seldom encourages thought. Does the problem lie with the authors' lack of vision, the medium's lack of potential or a general lack of appreciation for the medium and its potential?

Whatever the reason, it won't last – but probably not within my lifetime. After all, the exploitation of this medium has thousands of years of catching up to do.

Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki



Illustration: Istokes


BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN

Second Life gazes also...

It had to happen. Eventually, in my journeys into virtual worlds, I was going to step on someone's toes. I'm surprised it didn't happen sooner – but when it did happen, it happened big.

Two months ago, I wrote about my meeting with Torley Torgeson, and his online post-sexual love affair with Jade Lily, in the virtual world called *Second Life*. Torgeson and I had met, but not officially, and not much was said. News of Torgeson's unique relationship reached me via New World Notes, *Second Life* journalist Wagner James Au's regular online dispatches as perhaps the world's only virtual embedded journalist. Due to a mix-up, though, Au – aka Hamlet Linden – wasn't credited as the source for some of the quotes in the piece. Torgeson – one of *Second Life*'s brightest and most energetic residents – felt his words had been quoted out of context. Linden Labs, who developed *Second Life*, leapt to Torgeson's defence. In one deft move I'd pissed off the gods, the press, and the people.

By chance, the next day I was scheduled to visit Linden Labs' San Francisco HQ, to talk about the entire process of building and maintaining a virtual world. They showed me aerial maps of *Second Life*, as it grew from twelve square acres to almost a thousand. They showed me pictures of the virtual world as it would look with an infinite draw-distance; an almost limitless jumble of construction that looked as messy and as captivating as any real-world city. They told me how they'd felt after two years of development, when the first *Second Life* resident walked on their virtual earth. All the while, though, I was acutely aware of tension in the air. *Second Life* is a small world, with just 20,000 residents (although they say 2,000 new residents join each week). They were clearly protective over my trespass with Torgeson. A bigger company wouldn't have cared – press coverage is press coverage – but Linden Labs was clearly more vulnerable and more idealistic than most games companies. They cared. I faced a kind of immune-system response: was I friend? Or foe? Then a remark by **Philip Rosedale**, Linden Labs' CEO, cast the whole experience in a different light.

We were talking about how easy it is in *Second Life* to broadcast your intended self, through virtual clothes, virtual property, virtual gestures and virtual body-shape. "It's a trap," Rosedale said. I asked him to explain. "I mean that, in *Second Life*, your ability to project an identity is so high, that it's a trap. A good one, but a trap. I think people come to virtual worlds sometimes because they think they can be more anonymous, and hide behind a pretended identity with greater skill than in the real world. But *Second Life* is going to pull out of you a little more than you wanted to say. You go into it thinking you're in control. I think what happens is, you realise, you're not in control."

> "I think people come to virtual worlds sometimes because they think they can be more anonymous, and hide behind a pretended identity"

I was at Linden Labs to write a piece for the New York Times about a group of disabled and autistic people who used *Second Life* as a practise arena to help them grapple with the real world. I'd approached the issue as a detached observer, but Rosedale's remark made me see there was also something here for me. What he'd described was exactly what had happened with Torgeson. I'd thought I was in control, but the virtual world showed me otherwise. These people weren't pixels on a computer screen. They were outside my control, and they were very, very real.

Rosedale told me that, at Linden Labs, they had worked hard for a practical solution to an old philosophical problem: what is real? "The thing we concluded," he said, "is that something is only real if you can change it. If there's a pixel on the screen in front of you in Second Life, and you can't alter it, then why would we put it there? It just fades into some... neutral grey ether. There are more subtle answers, too. Is something real if you can't own it?"

Building a virtual world is a practical endeavour, and for that you need practical definitions. Things are real if you can change them, or you can own them. Both of these, I saw applied to objects – but, in offending Torgeson, I'd discovered a new definition of what was real, one that also applied to people. Real things could be hurt, too.

A writer gets their education in public. I knew my journey into virtual worlds would become a journey into our own world – to discover, as I have, that in the last 20 years the number of people living alone in Europe has doubled, and that loneliness is part of the fuel which drives us to seek each other out online. What I didn't realise, until now, is that it would also become, in part, a journey into myself. It wasn't just those with autism, or those with cerebral palsy, who were changed by virtual worlds. I learned something too – something a close reading of Nietzsche should already have taught me. When we gaze into *Second Life*, *Second Life* gazes also into us.

Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Granta





BIFFOVISION

Kilroy was here

Forget the four horsemen of the Apocalypse – Famine, Pestilence, War and whatshisname (Herpes? Binge Drinking? Janet Jackson's Boobie?) – you know things are bad when Bono gallops over with his sword of self-righteousness. I have a theory that, as the world ends and the sun swallows the earth, Bono will totter into view to reassure our boiling descendents that he's going to sort everything out moments before a solar flare fries the cocksure little leprechaun.

As I pen this column, beleaguered *Tomb Raider* publisher Eidos is considering a buyout bid from Elevation Partners, a California-based venture capital group which counts the thumb-sized Irish crooner among its directors. If the bid is successful it will mean that one of the last global-scale British publishers will be owned by a company based in San Francisco.

Fortunately, Elevation isn't the only company with its eyes on Lara Croft's assets (geddit?). Also bidding for Eidos is rival British publisher SCi, presenting us with nothing less than a trans-Atlantic tussle for the very trousers of the British games industry.

Our domestic games industry is apparently making more money than British TV or film, primarily because so much British software is shifted overseas. There are, we are told, 7.5 per cent more people employed in the UK games industry today than there were in 2000, albeit smeared between six per cent fewer developers.

However, if you can't argue with the success of, say, the Scotland-developed *GTA* series, neither could you argue that *San Andreas* is a particularly British style of game. It perhaps wouldn't go down so well in Hotdogsville, Iowa, if it was full of frantically texting chavs, but isn't it a shame that international success comes at the expense of our national identity?

If I look back to the games I loved when I was younger – *Trashman, Everyone's A Wally, Skool Daze, Jack The Nipper* et al – they could never have been created in America or Japan. They were dripping with the very texture of our green and pleasant land; all red postboxes, and fish and chips, and scarlet-cheeked bobbies. Yet making a game feel British isn't merely about iconography – it's something more intangible. Something you won't find in *Resident Evil 4*, or *Half-Life 2*, or – let's face it – *The Getaway* (or, as I like to call it, "*Get It Away From Me*").

If you pitched a game like *Skool Daze* to a publisher in 2005 they would literally spit in your face. Firstly, because it doesn't resemble any other game on the market, and secondly because it wouldn't appeal to their global demographic, as calculated by Super Marketingbot V4-004. Doubtless it'd have an even cooler reception in the wake of the dismal overseas performance of *The Getaway: Black Monday*, which will no doubt be blamed on the Mockney setting, rather than the po-faced, clichéd storyline, and abysmal design.

> Far be it for me to come across like Robert Kilroy-Silk, but it saddens me to see our sense of what makes us unique being eroded

What I loved about *Skool Daze* wasn't that it had compelling gameplay or fantastic graphics, but that it spoke to me. It reflected some aspect of my life as a pre-teen boy in early-'80s UK. From the wall bars in the hall to the routine of the school assembly, I recognised it as my world. But more than that, on some subconscious level I must have recognised it as a product of my environment – the unpretentious humour was strictly British. Do any of today's games speak to their audience in quite the same way? Will *Without Warning* (from the team behind the cod British *Tomb Raider*), or *Wipeout Pure*, or *Cold Winter*, or any number of so-called 'British' games prove comfortingly familiar to the youth of this mongrel nation? Or will they merely play it safe, showcasing designs meant to appeal to Jim-Bob Chewgrit III from Appleseed, USA?

Far be it for me to come across like Robert Kilroy-Silk, but it saddens me to see our sense of what makes us unique being eroded. It depresses me further still to see this country's game creators forced to suppress creativity in order to pander to an intercontinental market.

We are probably the last generation to have grown up filtering foreign influences through a sticky gauze of our own pop cultural bedrock – Rentaghost, and the Beano, and Grange Hill et al. In a world where the internet, and Cartoon sodding Network, with its wall-to-wall foreign cartoons, maintain a stranglehold on our children's psyches, our cultural touchstones are becoming the same as those of American youth. Consequently, we should be doing whatever we can to keep hold of the more singular elements of our cultural identity. In fact, with gaming being an ever-more-popular aspect of British youth culture, it's more important than ever that our games reflect our way of life.

To use a TV analogy, UK studios aren't trying to make the next Benny Hill or Monty Python – they're trying to make Saturday Night Live and Friends. It seems a shame we can no longer look inward for inspiration. Then again, when our own prime minister practically walks around wearing cowboy boots, and punctuates Question Time by firing a rifle in the air, and shouting "Yee-haw!", what hope do we have?

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



Inbox



Issue 149

In the feature Points Of Review, way back in Edge 124, you boldly stated: "There is no such thing as the definitive review. The words are anachronistic; reviews are critiques, and critiques are, ultimately personal; definitive means a singular vision but you can't wrap a single verdict around everyone's opinions in the first level of *Halo*, let alone the whole 20-hour adventure... There is no definitive view." Wise words, indeed.

Why, then, on the front cover of the latest issue of Edge (149) does it describe the reviews of *God Of War*, *Wipeout Pure* etc as definitive? Whilst I would trust Edge's reviews more than probably any other magazine's, what's changed in the intervening two years that means a review can now be described as 'definitive'? Or, what's different about your reviews that makes them any more 'definitive' than any others?
Stephen Smith

Rather than 'Definitive reviews' on the cover of E149 we were going to have it read 'The best reviews'. Or possibly 'Expert reviews'. Or perhaps 'Reviews without the free chocolate bars'. To be honest, we couldn't decide, so we thought we'd just set you a little test instead. You passed.

I'd like to express my sympathy to Richard Cross over his views of the controls in *Resident Evil 4* (Inbox, **E**149). While it didn't ruin the game for me, the experience was definitely diminished. It joins the list of games like *Metroid Prime*; ones with unorthodox controls forced on the player by well-meaning developers that you have to learn to adapt to, even though to most players they're counterproductive.

Ever since games like *Ratchet & Clank*, *Metal Arms* and *Transformers* took the standard FPS control system and integrated it seamlessly into thirdperson, any other attempt to control a character that needs to move, look and shoot seems woefully inept and completely unintuitive.

Ever since games took standard FPS controls into thirdperson, any other attempt to control moving, looking and shooting seems completely unintuitive

Maybe it stems from the Japanese aversion to the FPS genre, but I can't think of a single Japanese game that lets you use this method.

It all comes down to how the right stick is used, if at all. Even in non-shooting, platforming thirdperson games, all Japanese developers and several western ones go with the *Mario 64* idea that the right stick is moving a camera. My brain, along with some western developers, think the right stick is moving the character's head, so pushing right looks right; it doesn't rotate an imaginary camera anti-clockwise to look left. Coupled with the Japanese tendency to favour inverted look, it means that in some games I struggle (then invariably give up) with a right-stick 'look' which moves in the exact opposite way I'm expecting.

As you've stated time and again, not giving the end-user customisable controls isn't acceptable any more. *Ratchet & Clank 3* is still the pinnacle of customisable camera controls, giving the player the choice of any of the modes I've mentioned. Hopefully, the next round of consoles will let us create a profile to remember all the usual game preferences. Where appropriate, all games could then default to these choices, so we'll no longer be at the whim of the developers.
Spencer Kingman

Interesting timing, because Microsoft has been working on precisely such an initiative for Xbox 360 preferences, allowing you to carry a single set of setup data over to all of your games.

Regarding Hype, and 'Why marketing men need to eat more lean' (**E**149) – £60!? what the f"%&? I can't believe that the marketing and PR people are that deluded that they think they could just click their fingers and make us all pay double for what would undoubtedly be the same regurgitated games. Talk about wanting your 'pound of flesh'.

Instead of doing the sensible thing of thinking up new and innovative ways of creating revenue they are perfectly happy with taking an extremely cowardly way out and potentially drastically reducing the amount of units actually sold of each game, which would mean less profits (and less games industry). Where would their precious brand names be without loyalty?

Everybody knows that the most successful games (on the whole) have been games backed and supported en masse by a community of one sort or another. Games such as *Half-Life*, *Doom*, *Quake 3*, *Unreal Tournament* etc had impressively longer lifespans with the aid of wave upon wave of mods, skins and levels on the net.

What the industry needs to be thinking about is how to stretch the consumers; how to bleed them dry slowly... with content!

Look at the current trend for text voting, wallpapers and ringtones. The public are warmed-up to it now and stupid enough to fall for it too! Come on, give us new maps and levels that can be downloaded for a small fee, give us servers for online games that we can pay to subscribe to at ten quid every soddin' month, give us new characters, skins and game modes to be added on effortlessly to our already varied gameplay. Make your games more like a frameworks you can plug content into and keep us all on a slow-wallet-dripfeed (or drain, or something!).

Let's NOT focus on flashy marketing and vacuous celebrities who have no intellectual link to the games or hardware whatsoever. Let's stop spending money on champagne and cocktail parties for people who don't matter one little bit. Or on big-breasted no-brained blondes who bear some slight resemblance to the characters that are exploited in these games (we're not spotty 15-year-old, over-active kids any more – I think it's time the industry moved on a little, even if for our own self respect).

Let's move a little outside of those little tickboxes we find on the back of fancy-ass packaging these days and think about how to make the game last a little bit longer.
Luke Stowe

Again, interesting timing, since with Xbox 360 and its revamped Xbox Live service Microsoft aims to properly evolve and exploit downloadable content – and you're right not to expect it for free. To get up to speed, be sure to read the Xbox 360 story in this month's Start section.

I love my Nintendo DS. The blend of new innovative software (*Project Rub*, *Wario Ware DS*) with timeless classics (*Super Mario 64 DS*) seems to be just right – and that got me thinking. I'm as keen as the next person to see new Nintendo innovations – titles you could only play on the DS – like *Nintendogs*, but why leave it at that?

While recently clearing out some old PC games that had been gathering dust in my loft, I was struck by a sense of loss about getting rid of some timeless classics – such as the LucasArts point-and-click adventures. I toyed with the idea of loading them into my PC, but the prospect of configuring Windows XP to emulate an old DOS game seemed like a bad plan – who's got the time? And it probably wouldn't have worked anyway. Then it hit me! Why don't LucasArts and Nintendo redevelop/port these titles to the DS? It's the perfect platform for the otherwise struggling genre of point-and-click adventures. Can you imagine *Day Of The Tentacle*, *Sam & Max* or the *Monkey Island* games on your DS? The top screen could be used for your inventory/map, with the lower screen for the main action plus a handy mini-inventory bar that could be transferred from the top screen using the D-Pad. To interact with NPCs, you either point at them, to engage them in conversation, or drag the necessary item from the mini-bar to the relevant character! Movement would be as simple as pointing where you want to go! It would be awesome. LucasArts have published this type of game on Nintendo consoles before – I'm old



Extensively playing *Final Fantasy XI* and nothing else has left Louis Closs scrabbling to find progression in non-online games

enough to remember the release of *Maniac Mansion* on the NES – so why not do it now? I'm sure there would be a market for such games – any search of the web will confirm the massive love and support for LucasArts' finest games. What do you think?
James Miller

I didn't play a single other game while playing Final Fantasy XI. Now, I no longer feel the progression and importance as much as I once did in games

Well, owners of PocketPCs and Tapwave Zodiacs have been playing LucasArts' oldies via SCUMM VM for some time now, but, yes, these just *have* to make an official DS reappearance, hopefully as a collection.

Having recently quit the MMORPG experience with *Final Fantasy XI* after over 1,000 hours' playtime spread over two characters in the space of a year, due to the annoyance and immediacy of 'real life', I feel somewhat lost.

I've tried to get back to playing 'normal' videogames, thinking I could just easily slip back into my old routine. It's not so simple, though. Before *FFXI*, I felt some sort of progress within a videogame, some kind of importance that I just got to the penultimate level or I got that upgrade or defeated a certain boss. I always felt more progress with RPGs than most videogame genres but nevertheless I still always believed there was a point to what I was doing and there was something to be gained. When I started playing *FFXI*, all of that went out of the window and I soon began to know the true meaning of progression and upgrading. Of course, I was addicted. Not only to the fine detail of how you could adjust and augment your character, but to the social aspect; the meeting of new people and letting them influence what you were going to do today.

Since then, I've felt a huge gaping hole in my interest of videogames. I don't see how MMORPGs and ordinary videogames can exist in equilibrium. I didn't play a single other game while playing *FFXI*. I no longer feel the progression and importance as much as I once did in games.

Recently, games such as *Resident Evil 4* and *Metal Gear Solid 3* have helped, but only as immersive experiences and not as something that feels I can keep adding to.

I can't afford the time or money to play any MMORPGs at the moment, but I hope I can work something out in the future.
Louis Closs

It's perhaps the strong contrast between the longterm pleasure of playing MMOs like *FFXI* or *WarCraft* and solo, instant-gratificaion games like *God Of War* that ensures they can both survive – either by pleasing different players, or by pleasing players in different moods.

I found the urge to write after reading the article on marketing at the front of the Hype section in issue 149. I agree that advertising is sparse and uninspiring, as is the boxart for most games. However, recently I experienced something new. I have always found that game stores rarely differ no matter where in the country I have been. Always they have dark carpeting, dull painted walls and 'adequate' lighting that is just bright enough to light the products, but dark enough to hide the rough edges that are abundant in both décor and displays. Recently, however, I ventured into my local shopping centre to find that something had changed. Where once stood the usual dark entrance to GAME, a bright, open, eye-catching shop front now stood in its place. Light laminate flooring, well-spaced displays positioned clear of the floor to ceiling windows, off-white walls and more than 'adequate' halogen lighting conspired to create a much more welcoming look. This may not seem like a worthwhile mention, but it created a completely different feel. To use a well-worn analogy, it took the gaming out of the basement and placed it squarely on display in the middle of town. I clearly wasn't the only one that approved of the new design, as the store was far busier than I had seen it on previous visits. I can't help but feel that if the other game retailers took this approach it may bring in more interest from outsiders, while also reinvigorating the enthusiasm of the existing game consumer. I can't be the only one starting to become disheartened by the dingy look of gaming stores. Perhaps games companies could use some of their wasted marketing budgets to sponsor these makeovers around the country, to help the stores that sell their games increase their retail figures. This in turn would put more money in the games companies' pockets and everyone becomes a winner!
Andrew Patten

In the past weeks of election campaigning I noticed something in the government's gambling bill involving the tightening of restrictions on fruit machines. Under the new law, due to come into affect in 2007, these machines will have higher licences or more restrictions. For small businesses these are a source of income, which may need to be replaced – possibly by arcade machines, which will be exempt from the restrictions: they also have no age restriction and don't pay out, so in theory, they should create more income. With the next generation of arcade hardware being based around economy, the cards may be set for a boost in machines – not in actual arcades, which seem increasingly outdated, but in the pubs and kebab shops of Saturday nights out, surviving in a warped and spread-out form that suits modern life better. This may seem idealist, but the idea of using *Tekken*

Continued

tournaments to decide the buyer of the next round is an alluring one.
James Russ

We're all for it. Anything, in fact, would beat the tacky quid-a-go cocktail cabinet featuring rip-offs of *Donkey Kong*, *Pac-Man* and *Pong* that can be found covered in cigarette ash and beer stains in one of **Edge**'s locals.

There seems to be a continual argument for and against retrogaming. I do agree that retro is the current trendy term for anything games-related that isn't to do with current-generation consoles; however, everyone should consider these games/consoles with regard to the time they were released and their competition then, not now. Of course old games look terrible and basic now – but bear in mind the impact classic games had at the time.

In E148's inbox Andrew Merson wrote about how he prefers an extra round of gameplay than a denim jacket or concept sketch. Sure, we'd all like an extra course in *SSX3*, but in theory concept art and 3D galleries can only add to the gameplay. Each 'sketch' makes you wonder, pleases you to the fact of near completion and when you're bored can give you ideas to expand on. Isn't it these sketches that help the future videogame artists draw up some magic? The inclusion of 'dressing up' in games gives you more freedom, it lets you do things with a bigger smile on your face, and when you finally get those white trainers or that yellow mohican it all suddenly feels worthwhile.
Ollie Banham

I think it's fair to compare the history of videogames to film history; both are massive entertainment industries; both have originated from tiny, independent companies or individuals into massive global corporations fighting for your money; and both have a relevant, interesting history that must be learnt from.

Old games, like old films, were basic and by today's standards pretty ropey. However, also like film, the gaming industry is constantly evolving and learning (but not as often as it should, judging from recent releases).

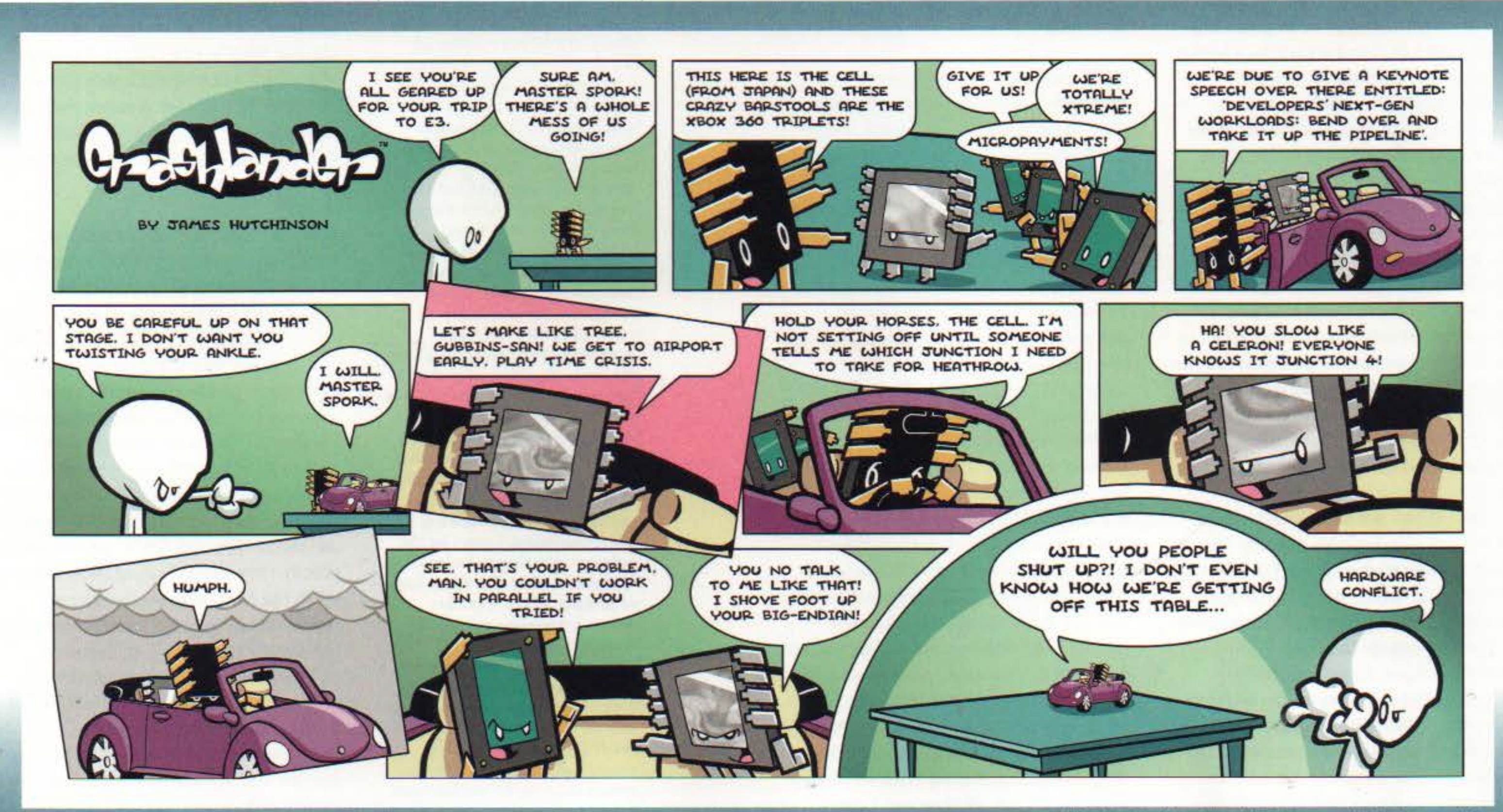
Look at an old silent movie: terrible acting; no huge budget; no CGI – overall, a pretty miserable experience if it was released today. But it wasn't. It was showing in cinemas before you or I were born. In fact, it was showing before your grandparents were born, and at the time it was considered good entertainment.

The same can be taken in context with regard to videogames. Try comparing *Resident Evil 4*, a game I have completed three times, with the Spectrum classic *Skool Daze*. No contest, is it? However, I have been fortunate to see games from their very early 8bit days and watch them make generational leaps, but I've never forgotten how games have got to be so amazing. Even if someone was born way after the '70s or '80s, they should never forget their gaming routes, and take an oldie in context.

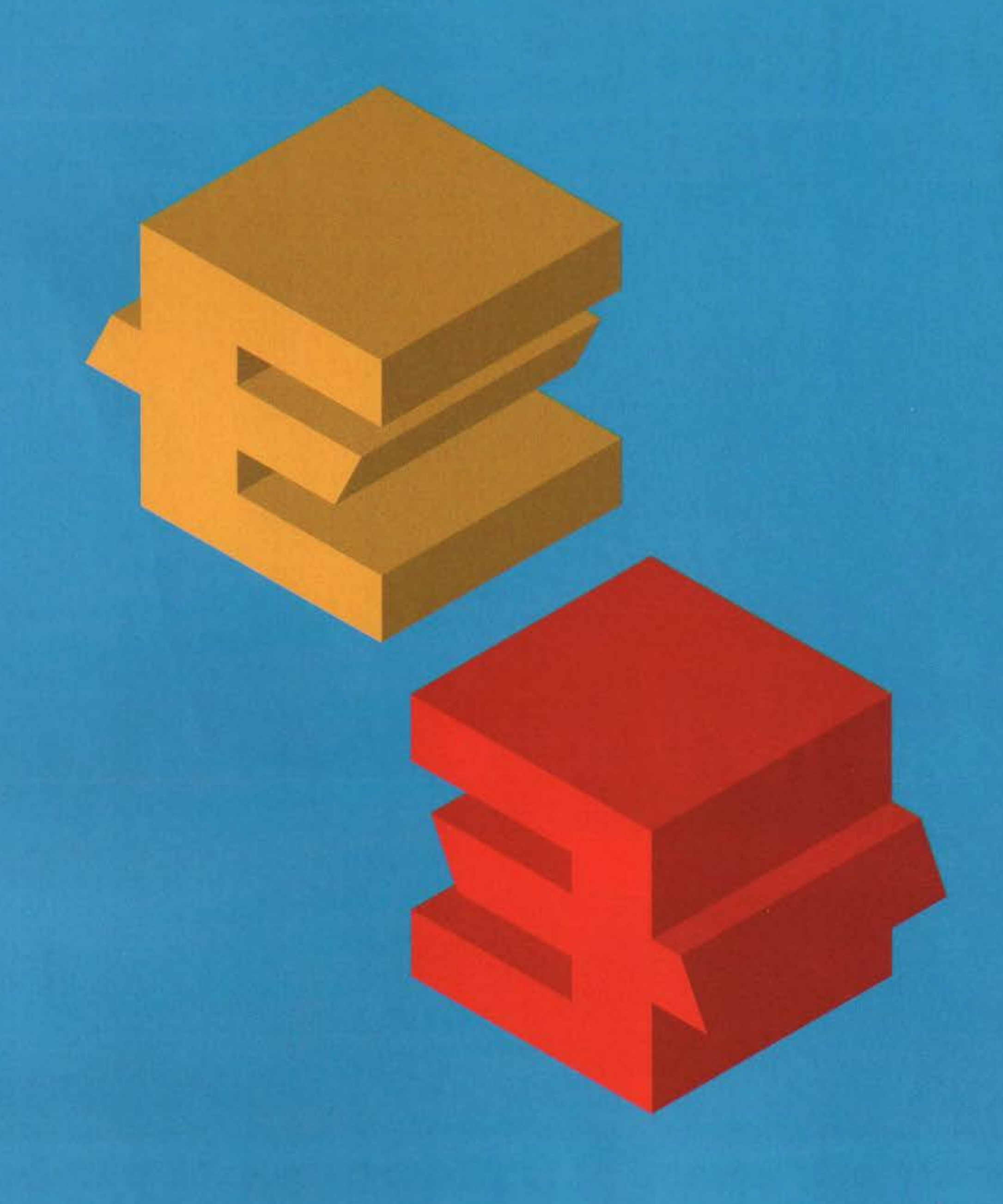
Now to spend five minutes loading up *River Raid* from tape...
Richard Evans

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